ロスト・ユニバース⑤

闇 終わるとき

神坂 一

イラスト 義仲翔子

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Lost Universe 5: When Darkness Ends

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Prologue

And then—the boy's figure vanished into the depths of the darkness. Even the light of the flashlight he should have been holding was now gone from sight.

"Big brotheeeeeeerr!"

No matter how loudly she screamed, there was no sign of him returning. The girl was left alone in a world devoid of even sound. The silence only amplified the weight of the dark.

"………………"

After a moment of silence—the girl, Alicia, slowly began to move forward.

It was terrifying to advance through the pitch black with only a single small flashlight, but waiting here alone, perfectly still, was even more frightening.

"…Big… brother…"

Cowering at the delusion that something unrecognizable might leap out from the gloom, the girl crept forward—

"……………………?"

Suddenly, she stopped. She felt as if she had been called. By something.

—Come to think of it, hadn't her brother said earlier that he felt like he was being "called by something" too? —If so, if I go that way, maybe big brother will be there—

The girl began to walk again. Into the darkness. Toward the voice.

Two streaks of light were visible. Raising small lights in their hands, a young boy and girl moved forward. And soon—the boy began to walk away. Leaving the girl behind. Into the darkness. Aiming for the place where "it" resided.

—Don't go—

The voice of "Vorfeed" did not reach the boy. The boy vanished into the darkness—and then, only the girl remained standing there—Eventually, that girl also began to walk. If left alone, she too might end up encountering "it."

—No! This way—

The girl's feet stopped.

Whether she had heard the call or not, she moved toward the voice with hesitant, fearful steps. She stopped in front of a ship's hull that was halfway buried in the ground. She shone her flashlight all around, searching for someone.

"…Is… anyone there…?"

In her questioning voice, there was a mixture of fear.

—It is I—

At the "voice" of Vorfeed, the girl's body shuddered with a start.

"Who! Where are you!?"

The girl hurriedly looked around again.

—Right in front of you—this spaceship is my body—

"What are you!? Stop hiding and come out!"

At the call, the girl let out a cry close to a scream, now half in tears. She was terrified.

Vorfeed understood this as well. Waves of "fear" were emanating from the girl. If the entity didn't manage to soothe her, not only would she not listen—she might even be absorbed by "it." The solution—was a gentle method of contact that would be easy for the girl to understand.

First, language. From the conversations shared by those who had been investigating Vorfeed, the analysis of this civilization's speech patterns was nearly complete. And then—a "voice." A female one would likely be best.

If the invisibility was what scared her, then a form would need to be synthesized.

Searching through the records for a list of visual data of the staff members who had been involved in Vorfeed’s construction, the entity picked out one suitable female appearance. Then, it created a holographic projection.

Performing such tasks in an instant was trivial for Vorfeed.

"—I am sorry. For startling you."

At the woman's voice that suddenly rang out, the girl's fear lessened slightly.

"I will show myself now."

A hatch near the girl slowly opened. Inside stood a single woman.

—She looks like a lady from a video game—

Alicia thought to herself as she looked at her attire.

"Hello. What happened?"

As the woman asked this with a gentle smile, the fear within the girl vanished.

"…Um, I got separated from my big brother."

"…I see…"

"Big sister… who are you? A person from this ship?"

"I am… 'Vorfeed'."

"…Vor…f…?"

The girl furrowed her brows as she spoke.

Indeed, it was likely a difficult name to pronounce. It might not even be appropriate as a woman's name. Vorfeed decided to give this newly created female personality another name. What would be a good name? Something easy to remember and feminine would be best. Unfortunately, the name of the woman used as the visual model was excessively long.

—A name—

In the depths of memory, there was something suitable.

The name of the angel who, in legends of the past, had destroyed the mad demon king, the spreader of darkness Dugradigdu, using the demon king's own weapon, the Sword of Fierce Light—

"—Then, please call my name Canal—"

"I am—"

The girl said.

"Alice. Alicia Von Stargazer."

Fear

The beach, stretching endlessly, sparkled white in the sunlight, and the shore, where the sound of waves carried, was filled with many murmurs.

Children running around excitedly. Women in sunglasses tanning their skin. People enjoying beach volleyball. Men acting like sportsmen for the sake of style, pouring their efforts into picking up girls.

—Pop… po-po-pop.

Perhaps an event was being held somewhere. The sound of festive fireworks carried on the wind. The blue star with its archipelago, the ocean planet Saltary.

Originally terraformed for the purpose of securing marine resources, this planet had developed into a major resort area before anyone realized it. The people gathering on the eternal summer beach laughed and chattered without a care—

"…What? What’s that?"

Who was it that said that, pointing at the pale, translucent sky? The sky—was distorted.

—The refractive index of a portion of the atmosphere is changing—

If there had been a meteorologist among the people gathered at the beach, they might have realized that—but to the people, the cause didn't matter. Not compared to the shape of what the distortion was creating.

—An inverted pentagram—

Few people would have been ignorant of what that meant. A panic—erupted. The cheerful voices that had filled the beach turned into screams, shouts, and cries.

—However—

It did not take much time for that panic to turn into eternal silence. The murmurs created by humans ceased. Only the sparkle of the white sand and the sound of the waves remained as they were.

—Pop. Pop.

Only the automatic fireworks echoed vainly—

Space was filled with fear. —It would be stranger not to be afraid. Within the past month or so, as many as seven planets had perished.

It began with the total annihilation of the Space Force fleet. Following that, a series of suspicious deaths occurred among spaceship crews.

—Five lights and fear shall kill you—

Such a message flowing through interstellar communications, along with the name of the sender—"Nightmare," which shared its name with the largest crime syndicate in the galaxy—was stoking people's anxiety.

And then—the residents of a single planet were completely wiped out. Planet Jennoh. That was the beginning of the next step. Since then, six planets had perished in quick succession.

In every case, the cause was unknown. What was known was—just before the destruction, the light of an anachronistic inverted pentagram appeared above each planet—This was captured in numerous visual records. However, no change occurred in those who saw the pentagram in the visual records.

Because the cause was unknown, people's fear only intensified, and various speculations flew about.

Divine judgment, the work of a demon, a legacy of a civilization that had previously flourished in the galaxy, an invasion by extra-galactic intelligences…

Among them were theories that struck close to the truth, but groundless speculations were, after all, nothing more than nonsense and were never seriously debated. People simply feared and prayed that the inverted pentagram would not appear above their own heads—and the widespread "fear" steadily became "his" power.

* * *

—What should I do—!?

For some time now—Rail Flamer had been asking himself that very question.

Despite holding the position of an Inspector in the Interstellar Police, he had secret ties with the criminal organization "Nightmare"—Until now, he hadn't felt much guilt about that fact.

He wasn't the only one doing this. In the Interstellar Police and the Space Force, there were more than enough people with ties to the organization to sweep them up with a broom. This sort of thing was already an open secret. After all, was there really anyone in this world who had never committed a misdeed? Dropped litter on the road? Ignored a traffic light?

There would be those who argued that the levels of misdeeds were different. That was certainly true, but a crime was a crime, and where one drew the line was up to the individual.

There were those who were indignant at politicians using public funds for personal use while feeling no resistance to putting a family dinner on the company's expenses. That was how it was. And Rail thought: everyone is an informant. That’s all there is to it.

But—this time was different. Everything was beyond reason. Considering the situation, it was clear that the incidents were the work of Nightmare.

From the very beginning, a mysterious document that could be taken as a claim of responsibility had been sent out under the name of Nightmare, and he also knew that a command had been issued from the organization "not to impose a news blackout." If that incident was the organization's doing, there was no way the subsequent incidents were unrelated to them.

But if that was the case—what was it? What was the motive?

Nightmare was supposed to be nothing more than a "large criminal organization." At least, that was what Rail thought. The purpose of a criminal organization was, in the end, to make money. Except for the fact that the means were primarily criminal, they weren't much different from a normal corporation.

But what did this slaughter produce? What profit did it bring to Nightmare? The answer was—nothing.

At a glance, the incidents were indiscriminate. They had even destroyed planets where organizations under their own influence were located. This was doing nothing more than purely stoking fear and resentment. It was truly slaughter for the sake of slaughter—No other will could be read from these incidents.

—Indiscriminate slaughter on a galactic scale—

Even Rail could not let this go overlooked. Before even considering good or bad, tomorrow he himself might be chosen as a target of that slaughter. However—it was also a fact that there was no means to blow the whistle while protecting himself.

Now. Only a hollow sense of powerlessness occupied Rail's heart.

……Ruo-o-o-o-o-o-o……O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o……

The voice—was becoming more intense. The groaning raised by the darkness.

Jay Mercury had realized that this was by no means a figment of his imagination. —It was as if he were inside an infinite darkness. In reality, it was a dome-shaped space about twenty meters in diameter.

The floor, the walls, and the connecting ceiling all had the color of night, making this room feel far more vast than it actually was.

Since the interior was visible, there obviously had to be several light sources somewhere, but at a glance, there was only one light—namely, the inverted pentagram drawn on the center of the floor.

In the center of it, a single figure stood quietly. Silver hair standing up in the darkness. A sharp face reminiscent of a bird of prey. A cloak that might seem anachronistic suited him without the slightest sense of incongruity. The Supreme Commander of "Nightmare," Albert Von Stargazer.

The door that closed behind Jay separated this space from the normal world. The usual regular report—how many years had Jay continued this monotonous ritual?

Yet every time he stood in this room, he still could not suppress the rustle of fear in the deepest part of his heart. That rustle was growing larger by the day.

"—The conglomerate's earnings report for this month is out."

Struggling to hide his anxiety, Jay read aloud the report in his hand.

"It is down five percent compared to last month. As reported the other day, earnings are also down on the organization's side. …The cause is…"

Having said that, he paused for a moment. But the old man simply remained silent, standing still. …………………… Unable to endure the weight of the silence, Jay opened his mouth again.

"—It is likely predicted to be a matter of public perception. Rumors are spreading that we, 'Nightmare,' are the masterminds behind the series of indiscriminate slaughter incidents."

Jay said. It was an open secret that the Gazer Conglomerate and Nightmare were two sides of the same coin. With this series of incidents, Nightmare's ill repute had reached an all-time high, and it had finally begun to interfere even with their public business.

"…Some within the subordinate organizations are defecting to other groups. Unless this problem is solved, it is predicted that this trend will only grow stronger in the future. …How shall we proceed?"

The answer that came back to that question—was, in a sense, exactly what Jay had expected.

"Leave it alone. It doesn't matter."

"…Ha…?"

—I knew it—

While thinking that somewhere in his heart, Jay had raised his voice almost reflexively. Stargazer had simply cut away the operation of the organization—both public and private—with the single phrase "it doesn't matter."

In that case—the next words were already decided.

"More importantly, have you still not found that spaceship?"

—"More importantly"—? Are you saying a single tinkerer's spaceship is more important than the organization—?

"…No… we have still not been able to find it…"

To Stargazer's question, Jay answered while suppressing his emotions.

"Continue the search."

"…Understood… And about… the countermeasures for the public perception…"

"I leave it to you."

To Jay's repeated question, the old man replied in a tone that held no sentiment. Stargazer had been like this lately regarding everything, including the management of the organization.

"…Then… that is all for today…"

Jay bowed, turned on his heel, and walked through the door that had opened again—

"—For the next 100 hours, this area will be closed. The procedure is as usual."

Stargazer's words struck his back.

"—!"

By the time he turned around—the black door had already closed. —Again… huh… Without saying it aloud, Jay muttered.

There was no doubt that Stargazer was involved in the series of slaughter incidents. He would sometimes cut off contact with the outside world for several days. Along with that, there were rumors that an unidentified spaceship was sighted in the vicinity of this "Hecatoncheir." Without leaving any reaction whatsoever on any sensors.

Recently, that period and the period when the indiscriminate slaughter incidents occurred overlapped perfectly. In that case—anyone would think this: that Stargazer was slipping out from here in a spaceship that even Jay didn't know about and causing the incidents.

The motive was unknown. It was too much for a test of a new weapon. But—that old man would do it. Even if there was no motive. Slaughter for the sake of slaughter. He was shrouded in a dark atmosphere that was enough to make one believe so.

Of course, it wasn't something that could be confirmed with the person himself. As long as one was part of such an organization, unnecessary curiosity invited death. But what if—what if the ruler of that organization was running wild, ignoring the interests of the organization?

—Ignoring—the interests—?

Jay stood still for a moment in silence—

"Damn it all!" Thud!

Spitting out words of hatred, Ryan slammed his empty glass onto the counter. The ice inside bounced up, scattering amber-colored droplets.

"…You're quite worked up…"

Ryan glared sharply at the man sitting on the stool next to him, who spoke in a sober tone.

"You're acting pretty cool, aren't you! Rail!"

"…It's not… exactly like that…"

As he said it, Rail downed the rest of his glass in one go. The report of the destruction of Planet Saltary had come in today. That report had only further stoked the sense of powerlessness smoldering in Rail's chest—and so, it had come to this: going out for a drink with a colleague. Normally, his style was to enjoy a drink slowly and alone.

His colleague—Ryan, who was widely reputed in the station for having "mean eyes," glared at Rail with eyes made even more vicious by alcohol and stress.

"'Not exactly like that'? …Well, certainly, with incidents like this happening one after another, anyone who isn't panicked should just quit the Interstellar Police… But if you're panicked, then show it on your face. You're not being very endearing."

"I don't particularly want you to find me endearing."

Rail said with a wry smile, ordering another glass.

"…Hmph… that part especially isn't endearing…"

Ryan said, turning away. His rank was the same as Rail's—Inspector—but he was the type that was perfectly described as "tough" or "sturdy," in contrast to the more delicate Rail. He was older than Rail and the type who had worked his way up from the field—meaning it would be standard for him to be on bad terms with an elite like Rail, but for some reason, they got along oddly well and went out for drinks like this frequently.

* * *

"…Setting that aside… hey, Rail, did you hear? That story?"

"The one about Saltary being destroyed? If I hadn't heard, then it really would be a matter of 'quitting the Interstellar Police.'"

"…Not that. The one about Nightmare's subordinate organizations defecting left and right."

"—Oh. That's—the first I've heard of it."

Rail said, knitting his brows. He wasn't playing dumb. Even though he had secret ties to the organization, it was simply a matter of him receiving money and leaking information; information didn't travel from the organization to him.

"Basically, see. The guys in the low-level organizations are thinking the same thing after all. That 'Nightmare was the one who did it.'"

"…Hmm…"

Giving an ambiguous response, Rail ordered another drink from the bartender.

"…So… hey… what do you think? Rail? About this story that these incidents are

Nightmare's doing."

"It’s a rumor—right? Only."

Rail said, feigning composure.

"The grounds are just that when the first fleet destruction incident happened, a strange message was left—and the sender called themselves 'Nightmare.' That’s it. We don't even know if the culprit and the sender are the same, and that 'Nightmare' might not be the 'criminal organization Nightmare,' but just the sender using that name. —In any case—to link the criminal organization 'Nightmare' with the series of events, it's a rumor with thin evidence."

As he spoke, Rail tilted his glass. —Yes. It was a rumor with thin evidence. For someone who didn't know that the organization had pulled strings to prevent a news blackout at that time.

But—as for Rail, he couldn't let it be sensed that he was connected to the organization. He had to exclude the underlying elements and take as objective a view as possible. And when taking such a view—he was forced to reach this conclusion after all. That it was a mere rumor.

"…A rumor, huh…"

Ryan tilted his glass with a troubled face—and realizing he had downed it earlier, he ordered a replacement from the bartender.

"First of all, there's no motive. Even if it was a test of a new weapon or someone getting the wrong idea and trying to conquer the galaxy, no idiot would involve and destroy their own subordinate organizations, right?"

Yes. That was the question that Rail also had yet to solve.

"…That’s… right…"

Ryan scratched his chin.

"Rather, it’s much more convincing to think it’s some 'third-rate scenario written by another organization to frame Nightmare.' …But, you know… somehow… something’s nagging at me…"

"Nagging?"

To Rail’s question, Ryan tilted his glass.

"Yeah. A detective's hunch… you might laugh if I say that… well, it’s something like that. Among the countless rumors, there are sometimes those that hit upon the truth. I can't help but feel like this one is one of them."

"…Is that so?"

"Yeah. There’s definitely a connection. I don't have a reason, but I just can't help feeling that way."

"Even if you 'can't help feeling that way,' it's not like you can do anything about it, right? It's not like you can go to Nightmare's headquarters and say, 'I feel like you're suspicious, so I'm going to investigate.'"

"…Well, that's true… but I wonder if there’s something we can do. Like making up some convenient reason with another case or something."

"Hey now. That’s an illegal investigation."

"Don't be so stiff."

"When a police officer says that, it’s not a joke. That phrase."

Rail chuckled.

"Then, hey, what do you think? About this case. Who do you think the culprit is?"

"…Let's see…"

Asked, Rail took a sip of his glass. Rail himself hadn't noticed that the pace at which he was drinking was a bit faster than usual.

"—First, it is certain that a reasonably large organization is moving. This sort of thing isn't something that can be managed at an individual level. Next, the means are unknown. A high possibility is that some kind of new weapon was used—but that would mean the organization possesses considerable development capabilities. Now, as for the problem of the motive—it would be better to think that the motive simply isn't visible."

"Not visible?"

"Yeah. For example—let's see, let's assume some nonsense like 'it was actually the work of Nightmare, who is plotting to conquer the galaxy.' What if the top brass of the organization was possessed by delusions of grandeur? Even if it’s nonsense from an objective point of view, to those possessed by the delusion, it might look like it's 'within reach.' Even the story about Nightmare's subordinate organizations being destroyed—what if those subordinate organizations were actually plotting a betrayal and were being sanctioned? A tentative explanation could be made. However, this is, in the end, just stacking hypothesis upon hypothesis. You might even call it a stretch."

"That really is some nonsense. Hey."

To Ryan, who spoke with an exasperated face, Rail gave a small shrug.

"That's why I said so at the start, didn't I?"

Ryan downed his glass as if it wasn't even interesting.

"…I hear enough nonsense at the station every day. Anonymous, self-proclaimed influential information. Theories like Nightmare conquering the galaxy are on the cute side; there’s stuff about conspiracies of secret societies continuing from the Earth era, invasions of extra-galactic intelligent beings, the work of lost spaceships, divine judgment, new weapons of some planetary nation or another… A recent hit was 'the work of a revived demon.' It was a big hit in the station."

"—A demon, huh. That’s something."

Rail chuckled as he said it. Among the nonsense Ryan listed, there were actually stories that secretly hit upon the truth, but of course, Rail and Ryan wouldn't know that.

Lost spaceships, the crystallization of super-technology left behind by civilizations that flourished in the galaxy before humanity—in the eyes of the public, they were nothing more than mere fairy tales. To use an example from twentieth-century Earth, they were treated no differently than ancient dinosaurs or the Yeti.

"…Well, anyway. If we're talking realistically, the one who caused the incidents is a fairly large-scale organization with high development and production capabilities. That's the only thing that can be said for sure. …In that sense, 'the work of Nightmare' isn't necessarily far off the mark."

Rail said, tilting his glass— ...Chi-chi-chi... "Hmm? —Excuse me a moment."

At the sound like a bird chirping, he turned on the communicator/watch on his left wrist.

"Yes. —Yes. This is Rail. —Yes. I'm listening—"

He spoke into the communicator. Ryan, who was nearby, could not hear the voice of the person he was talking to. At a glance, it might look like someone crazy talking to themself, but Rail's communicator simply used a highly directional speaker. The other person's voice reached Rail's ears clearly. Because it had such a function, it was expensive compared to standard communicators, but given his job, there were times when he had to discuss things that would be bad if anyone around heard them, so this couldn't be helped.

Ryan finished the rest of his glass and ordered the next one from the bartender—

"—What… did you say…?"

Rail's tone suddenly became stiff.

"—Yes—immediately—I'm coming—The time will be a little—"

They exchanged a few more words—and soon, he cut the communication and stood up abruptly.

"—Sorry, Ryan. I have to go."

"What happened, hey."

To Ryan's question, Rail turned a pale face.

"—You know the story about Saltary being destroyed, right?"

"Yeah. We were just talking about it at the start."

Turning his back and heading for the exit, Rail left his words without even turning around.

"—It seems my family was there on vacation—"

Fear swirls.

Despair overflows.

And then, from a single planet, the light of life is extinguished.

The green planet stands before them.

While its outward appearance remained entirely unchanged, they could clearly see life fading from its surface.

—This is bliss...

The darkness trembled with a voice of ecstasy.

"This is bliss..."

And Stargazer, too, wove the words, as if tracing the leaves of the darkness's speech.

"Not a chaos polluted by clamor."

—A perfect order filled with silence...

"This is the true form of the universe."

—No... rather, order matters not...

"That is merely a triviality."

—Death for the sake of death...

"Destruction for the sake of destruction."

—That is my desire...

"That is my mission."

—To the galaxy

"—A nightmare... no—"

A silence where not even a dreamer of nightmares remains.

Whose words were they? As they watched, countless lives vanished from the green star.

"He's insane."

Jay Mercury realized this clearly. Two days had passed since Stargazer closed off the block where he resided. In those mere two days, the situation surrounding the organization—both public and private—had continued to deteriorate. Gradually, but surely.

And now—he had heard the report that an eighth planet had been devastated.

Stargazer is doing something using an unknown weapon.

That seemed the most logical explanation.

In this Hecatoncheir, there were many sections, starting with the central district, under Stargazer's personal jurisdiction—so-called "black boxes." Jay could only assume a new weapon developed there was being used.

Of course, the method of slaughter was far too nonsensical to be dismissed with the simple phrase "secret weapon," but it made more sense than thinking Stargazer's lockdowns and the incidents were mere coincidences.

The impact on the organization from this latest incident will likely be even greater. Or rather, to be blunt: if this continues, the organization will perish.

Voices of anxiety were rising even from the members inside Hecatoncheir—those who were supposed to be the most trusted within the organization. There was no need to state how serious this was.

This wasn't like a student bad-mouthing a teacher. Those criticizing risked their lives if they made one wrong move. And yet, the criticism was reaching Jay's ears. If this was the state at the core, what was happening at the fringes? Unless this situation was addressed, the organization would eventually collapse.

It would vanish. The organization Jay had climbed his way up to number two in, staining his hands with every kind of deed. "Nightmare," which had become the largest in the galaxy after countless bloodbaths and conflicts.

That had to be prevented at all costs.

There was a way to break the deadlock. It was a simple—yet infinitely difficult—answer.

Namely—stop Stargazer.

"That guy... has he finally grabbed some kind of lead...?"

Gazing at the jet-black space reflected on the main display, Ryan Horn muttered softly. In a corner of the display, a blue planet shone small. The Tora system, third planet, Luzolde.

It was none other than his colleague, Rail Flamer, who had summoned him to this sector of space some distance from the planet. With the destruction of Planet Saltary, Rail had lost his family. Since then, there had been no opportunity to speak, but just the other day, a message had come from Rail: "Come on patrol to this place at this time."

Naturally, he would use an Interstellar Police patrol ship, which wasn't difficult for Ryan, a member of the mobile task force. He could just tell his superiors something like, "I've received unconfirmed information that an unidentified spaceship is appearing near Luzolde."

In any case, the fact that Rail had summoned Ryan to this location meant there had been progress regarding the connection between those incidents and "Nightmare." That was how Ryan read it.

Eventually—

"A communication is coming in for the captain. It’s from the captain of the Interstellar Police M-207A Blue Paladin, Inspector Rail Flamer."

The communications officer spoke exactly at the appointed time.

"Patch it through."

At Ryan's word, Rail's face was projected onto the screen at the captain's seat.

"Yo, Rail. ...Did you find something?"

Ryan spoke with a slight smile, but Rail replied with a stiff expression.

"Do you know where I am?"

"Yeah. You've been on our radar for a while."

A single Interstellar Police ship existed some distance from his own; Ryan had confirmed this on radar earlier. Rail continued.

"Orbiting Planet Luzolde, the Gazer Conglomerate-owned experimental factory satellite Hecatoncheir... in other words, the 'Nightmare' headquarters. I am now going to conduct an illegal forced search."

"…Huh?"

For a moment, Ryan didn't understand what Rail had said and let out a dumbfounded sound.

"…What… did you just say…?"

"A police officer who lost his family, convinced the incidents are the work of 'Nightmare,' commits the reckless act of a forced search without a warrant. To stop that reckless act, you contact the Interstellar Police, wait for reinforcements, then board Hecatoncheir to find me, though you don't know where I am. That’s how it goes."

"…Rail… you…"

Ryan had previously suggested finding some convenient excuse with another case to investigate Hecatoncheir. Rail was saying he would become that "convenient excuse." It was madness.

Doing such a thing would almost certainly mean Rail's dismissal, no matter how things turned out afterward.

—But

Ryan felt he understood Rail's feelings.

"…This bastard… dragging me into such a reckless stunt…!"

As he spoke with a wry smile, an expression finally appeared on Rail's face—a hollow, wry smile.

"…Sorry."

"Buy me a drink when this is over. Got it? Absolutely."

Those were words of send-off—a promise to return safely.

"Understood—absolutely."

Rail nodded, and the communication ended.

The communication with Ryan ended, and silence fell over the bridge of the Blue Paladin, where Rail was. It was because of the phrase "illegal search" he had so casually tossed out.

To everyone present on the bridge, he said shamelessly:

"The 'illegal search' part was a joke. Don't worry about it."

A moment of silence. And then—

"Understood. It was a joke, then. We wouldn't know if the Inspector has a warrant or not," the female navigator said with a mischievous wink.

"Then there's no problem, is there?"

"Yeah, yeah. We underlings don't know anything to begin with."

"I didn't hear a word of the Captain's communication."

The staff on the bridge chimed in one after another. Everyone knew Rail had lost his family.

Sorry, everyone.

Rail bowed to them in his heart.

In a way, I might be the one who killed my own family.

Since his family's funeral, Rail had been haunted by that thought.

He had leaked information to the organization for some extra cash, and while he was half-convinced the incidents were the work of Nightmare, he had taken no action. Of course, taking action wouldn't necessarily have prevented the incidents. It might have just meant Rail drawing the short straw, while the incidents happened anyway.

—But even so

The fact remained that he had done nothing. Thinking of his own self-preservation. Giving up, thinking it would be useless. Was it really useless? Could the incidents really not have been stopped?

"Nothing would change even if one person moved"—was that really true? Certainly, he couldn't have done anything grand. But—a small thing would have been fine. If he had been able to change even one small thing—perhaps it would have eventually become a great tide and brought about a major change. The probability of that was certainly low. Low, but it shouldn't have been zero.

But Rail chose not to move, and as a result, he had made that probability zero. That was why he felt as though he had stood by and let his family be killed.

This move now was a way of settling scores with his past self, who had thought of self-preservation and hadn't moved.

He didn't know if this method was the best. It was a fact that he had involved his subordinates on the same ship. But—now that he had started moving, there was no more time for hesitation.

"Open communications to Hecatoncheir!"

Rail's resonant voice echoed through the bridge of the Blue Paladin.

"What's happening!?"

Jay shouted the moment he stepped through the door of the main command room.

He had received the message just now while he happened to be quite far from the main command room.

"An Interstellar Police patrol ship has announced a forced search."

When he received that report, even Jay's eyes widened. There were many instructions he wanted to give, but he couldn't have a careless conversation in a place where anyone might be listening.

"Buy time until I get there. I'll be there in about ten minutes."

He had said only that before cutting the communication.

"...Th-that is..."

The operators turned toward him with bewildered faces. Beyond them, on the main screen, a single patrol ship was floating right next to Hecatoncheir. It was firing its verniers and matching relative velocity. One could tell at a glance: it intended to dock.

...Damn...!

"I believe I told you to buy time...!"

"…Th-they won't respond to our communications…!"

To the communication officer who spoke with a panicked voice as Jay suppressed his erupting anger, he said:

"They approached suddenly... they sent a transmission, showed their Interstellar Police ID, and unilaterally declared, 'We are boarding for a forced search'… We told them to wait while we got the person in charge… but before we could even finish, they cut the transmission. No presentation of a warrant, no declaration of charges. I hurriedly contacted you—and after that, no matter how many times we call, they don't respond at all. We’re still trying to call them now, but…"

"That’s absurd!"

"Indeed, it’s hard to believe the Interstellar Police would do something so reckless. They could be agents of some organization in disguise... but in any case, making any further judgment is impossible for us."

—True

As long as the other party didn't even respond to communications, there was nothing the operators could do.

"And Lord Stargazer?"

"We reported via the emergency line, but... still nothing... What shall we do?" Asked, Jay set his thoughts in motion.

If they were disguised enemies, he absolutely couldn't let them inside. He would have no choice but to sink them without question. But conversely—if the other party was the real Interstellar Police, doing that would cause trouble. Even if he temporarily invited them inside, he would have no choice but to use the law and his silver tongue to get them to leave peacefully and quickly.

Fake—or real?

Being in this world, one occasionally encountered such situations. One of two choices. No clues to the correct answer. And failure would lead to ruin.

Jay had encountered such scenes several times before and had chosen the correct answer each time. That was what had allowed him to rise to the top of the organization at a young age.

And now. The operators were waiting for his words. Jay opened his mouth and—

"A communication is coming in!"

the communication officer's voice stopped the words that had almost reached his throat.

"From that spaceship!?"

To Jay's urgent question, the operator looked at the display and said:

"No! Based on the communication code... it’s another patrol ship!"

"Another one?"

Being in a planetary satellite orbit, various spaceships were coming and going in this vicinity. Looking at the radar site, several points of light were drifting some distance from Hecatoncheir. The first ship had likely approached rapidly by mixing in with those points of light—but it seemed another ship had been among the other lights.

"Patch it through!"

Almost as soon as Jay spoke, the main display switched. Projected was a sturdily built middle-aged man standing on a bridge. Jay didn't particularly like his oddly sharp gaze.

"This is the Interstellar Police patrol ship, hull number M-086A, Mist Knight. I am Captain Ryan Horn."

He introduced himself in a leisurely tone.

"This is Hecatoncheir. What is your business?"

Conversely, Jay's tone was fast. But the other party didn't break his pace.

"Well, actually, I happened to be patrolling the nearby sector of space. You see, we received an anonymous tip about a sighting of space pirates in this area. Well, since it’s an anonymous tip, as for its credibility—"

"Excuse me," Jay said, interrupting him. "We are also busy here. Your business, please."

"—My apologies. Well, actually, I was patrolling this area just now and happened to pick up a strange transmission. Something about an Interstellar Police patrol ship launching a forced search on your side. ...Well, I don't know the circumstances. We each have our own jurisdictions..."

"—But it’s hard to accept that they didn't present a warrant or state the nature of the charges, is that it?"

At Jay's words, which anticipated his point, the man on the screen did indeed stop moving for a moment.

—I see

Jay finally began to read this farce.

"…Well… to put it simply, that’s how it is… so…"

"I see. So you are saying you can confirm the ship's registry and the nature of the investigation on your end? That would be appreciated. Then, once you have the details, could you please contact us again?"

Without letting himself be caught in the other party's slow pace, Jay rattled off his words.

"—Ah—yeah."

The other party looked quite taken aback.

"We'll be waiting for your call, then."

Jay gave a wink and ended the communication.

"What does this mean?"

"It’s a farce orchestrated by the Interstellar Police. They're being quite bold," he answered the communication officer's question.

"The first ship docks by force, and meanwhile, the second ship buys time to delay our response. During that time, the crew of the first ship enters and conducts an internal investigation—or perhaps, on the pretext of stopping the crew of the first ship, the second party will come on board—it’s probably something like that."

In any case, it wasn't pleasant to have the Interstellar Police stepping in here. Jay gave instructions to everyone.

"Calculate the estimated docking point of the first approaching ship and send security there in force! Make sure to catch the intruders at that point! However, the use of weapons is forbidden!"

* * *

"He read everything, Rail!"

Facing the screen where communication had cut off, Ryan cursed under his breath.

"…So they have someone clever too, huh… If we’re stopped at the water's edge, it’s over… What now…"

Looking at the image on the main display—the Blue Paladin, had begun docking with Hecatoncheir—he muttered softly.

* * *

The lamp above the door glowed red. A faint tension spread among the lined-up guards. The Interstellar Police ship had apparently docked at this airlock.But—preparations for the welcome were complete.

The number of guards gathered here was roughly twenty. The crew size of an Interstellar Police patrol ship was said to be normally around twenty as well. Even if all of them came down, it was perfectly possible to stall them in this space, which wasn't even that large.

In the meantime, comrades stationed nearby would come as reinforcements. If that happened, the other party could go no further.If they used weapons—that would be exactly what they wanted. It would simply be a matter of counterattacking in self-defense and annihilating them.

And then—...Shuo-o-o-o-o-o-o...With the sound of air, the door opened.—For an instant the guards couldn't understand what they were seeing.Its height was about two and a half meters. A sleek body painted white.

—Powered Armor. Thick armor, overflowing power. Incidentally, for this model, weapons were an option."I am not carrying weapons. I am now conducting a forced search."The powered suit spoke in Rail's voice and began to walk with heavy thuds."—W-wait!""Stop!"Even as the guards shouted, it naturally didn't stop."—Take this!"Several people lunged at it, but with the guards clinging to it, the powered suit advanced with effortless, unchanging steps. Toward the depths of Hecatoncheir.

"ARE YOU INSANE!?"In the center of the main command room, Jay had shouted while staring at the display.He had intended to read all of the other party's moves. But he never imagined they would appear in such a form—The opponent was in powered armor—yet he was unarmed, and he wasn't even going on a rampage; he was simply walking.

If they used weapons against this, it certainly wouldn't be considered self-defense.Of course, it was impossible for bare-handed guards to restrain such a thing by force without using weapons.

Although this Hecatoncheir was effectively the Nightmare headquarters, formally it was a Gazer Conglomerate facility. It wasn't as if things that would cause trouble if seen by the Interstellar Police were just lying around—but in places that were hard to spot, such things were scattered all over.He needed to stop the powered suit before it noticed those "hard-to-spot places.

"For a moment, the idea of simply destroying it and making up some excuse like "they started rampaging first" crossed his mind, but there was a high probability the feed from the powered suit was being relayed to the patrol ship. If so, that wouldn't work.The most appropriate plan was to send out multiple powered suits from their side and use numbers to restrain it.

In this Hecatoncheir, there were powered suits kept for public "research and experimentation"—effectively for defense. However, their powered suits were fully armed. The other party had removed their weapons and was lighter. If the opponent focused purely on fleeing, it might be difficult to catch them.What a—troublesome opponent.

To begin with, the defensive facilities here were designed on the premise of defending against an enemy using armed force. A situation like capturing or removing a powered suit that was simply walking without using weapons was, naturally, not anticipated.

There was the method of closing bulkheads to seal them in—but doing that would, of course, make it difficult for them to move as well. That was strictly a last resort."For now—send the guards! Human wave tactics! They don't have to be able to stall him! Just slowing him down is enough! Launch the powered suit units! Use of weapons is strictly forbidden! I don't care if you crush a couple of their limbs, but absolutely do not kill them!"This was the most he could do.

"Any word from Lord Stargazer!?""…Still nothing…"Someone answered Jay, who was howling almost in a fit of rage. To think he was still maintaining silence even in such a situation—Cursing inwardly, Jay could nevertheless roughly imagine how that old man would answer if he asked for instructions.

"I don't care. Kill them," he would say, in a tone that seemed to say, "Don't ask me such obvious things."And thinking that far—suddenly, Jay thought of something.

Hecatoncheir

The dive bar was unusually lively today. Though—it was liveliness in a bad sense. DOGAJAAA!A man was sent flying, and an inexpensive table collapsed with a loud crash.
"You! Say that one more time!" Flipping his jet-black cloak with a flourish, he shouted. Contrary to his angry voice, a fearless smile was on his face.

His height was about 185 cm. Good-looking, with brown hair. If that were all, he might have received a normal evaluation as a "fairly good-looking guy"—but since he was wearing a jet-black cloak, that evaluation would likely undergo some correction.

However, seemingly unaware, he—Kane Blueriver—continued his words."What's weird about this cloak!?"More than a protest, he spoke with a sense of pride."…Y-you… stop talking in your sleep!"One of the companions of the man who had been sent flying, his face red from drink and now turning dark with anger, shouted at Kane.

"What's wrong with saying something weird is weird!? I don't know how it is in your backwater sticks, but around here, the constitution says 'it's okay to point and laugh at someone wearing a cloak'!"At the man's outrageous words, Kane let a small smile touch the corners of his mouth."Did you know it was decided in a plenary session of the Senate yesterday that 'you can knock those kinds of people down without question'?"
"AS IF THAT WOULD HAPPEN!"
"DON'T YOU BE THE ONE TO SAY THAT!"
"Anyway! You were the one who made the first move!"

The man and several companions surrounded Kane."You were the ones who made the first move with your mouths," Kane shot back, still wearing a somewhat enjoyable smile. —And then, the curtain rose on the fight.

DONDON DONDODODODODOOOON!Consecutive explosions shook the ship's hull.
About ten minutes later—A dozen different kinds of dishes were lined up on the table in the living room of the Swordbreaker.

"—Whoa. This is quite a spread.""Right? It’s been a while since I cooked to my heart’s content. ♡"At Kane's words, uttered reflexively upon his return from the satellite port, Milly puffed out her chest proudly."It was quite an ordeal. Truly."Coming from nowhere was Canal's voice, tinged with a smile.

She was the main control system—or rather, the will—of this spaceship, the Swordbreaker. In the cockpit, she had the form of a lifelike holographic image, but here she was only a voice."I modified the automatic repair devices to make the shuttle's cargo hold explosion-proof, then divided it into several sections and built a kitchen in each of them," Canal said casually.In the belly of this Swordbreaker, a shuttle about 50 meters long was docked upside down for traveling to and from planets.

Naturally, it was intended for their work as troubleshooters. Since she had converted it into a kitchen without permission, he would normally be angry. But—this time was special.
"Even so, two or three blocks were destroyed by explosions during cooking..."
(Just what kind of cooking process explodes an explosion-proof kitchen...?)
Such a thought flickered through Kane's mind, but for now, he decided not to think about it.

Until now, Milly had cooked while shattering various cooking utensils, but somehow, every single time, the taste was top-notch. It was completely incomprehensible, but in the end, the conclusion Kane reached was a very simple one.—It tastes good, so it’s fine!"Well then... let's eat.""Let's eat! ♪"The knives and forks in their hands reached for the mountain of food.

"Well then. We've drank, we've eaten, and we've had a scrap."Kane said as he took his pilot's seat."And I've cooked to my heart's content."And Milly took her gunner's seat."—Then—"A girl appearing in the center of the cockpit in the form of a shrine maiden from a fantasy story—Canal—spoke.

Gazing out into the depths of the jet-black space reflected on the main display. Kane and Milly both nodded in silence."Target sector: Tora system, third planet Luzolde, orbital satellite Hecatoncheir! Swordbreaker, launch!"And then—from an nameless satellite port on a small planet, a single spaceship took flight—

"Communication from the Interstellar Police!""Patch it through!"Jay responded almost reflexively to the operator's report. He could more or less guess the business. Based on the reports so far, he knew that Interstellar Police patrol ships were gathering around Hecatoncheir. Before long, their numbers would surely swell further.After all, on Luzolde's satellite, Trisiphone, there were bases for the Interstellar Police and the Space Force.

The fact that Hecatoncheir was the Nightmare headquarters was an open secret. Naturally, the Interstellar Police and the Space Force knew that. That was why they had built a base in such a place, as a way of keeping the organization in check.The fact that patrol ships launched from the base were gathering—he could more or less read the subsequent development.

"This is Ryan Horn of the Interstellar Police."The man who had sent the transmission earlier appeared on the screen."Upon investigation, the patrol ship docked with you is indeed one belonging to the Interstellar Police. It seems they went ahead and acted without a warrant to conduct some investigation. We are truly sorry." His tone was a complete change from the previous evasive one, now crisp and business-like.

"The Interstellar Police will take care of our own blunder. We will dock now and retrieve the ones who intruded.""I leave it to you."At Jay's casual words, not only the staff in the main command room but even Ryan on the screen froze for a moment. He had likely expected Jay to refuse.

He continued regardless."Then, once we have captured and confirmed the current location of the intruders, we will give instructions for docking at the nearest docking port, so thank you."

"…Ah… yeah. We appreciate your cooperation."
"See you later, then."After sending a greeting, he cut the communication.

"…I-is it okay? To let them in?"One of the operators asked, with an underlying nuance of "without asking Stargazer."
"It can't be helped. Even if we refused, it's obvious they would say, 'This is official business to apprehend illegal intruders. Refusing constitutes obstruction of official business.' If that happened, they would dock wherever they liked without question and wander around the interior as they pleased. In that case, it's a better strategy to take a friendly attitude and use that to our advantage to limit the opponent's movements."
"…I-I see…"
"And—any word from Lord Stargazer?"
"…Still… nothing. We are reporting the situation sequentially, but…"
"I see..."—As expected, Jay muttered in his heart.

Rail was moving haphazardly through corridors he didn't recognize. In executing this plan, he had made some preparations. Naturally, he had also tried to obtain internal maps of Hecatoncheir—but the schematic he had obtained, even after hacking into the Gazer Conglomerate's corporate network, was a pitifully incomplete thing.

What he knew was only a tiny portion of the giant facility, which was 20 km long and shaped like a rugby ball—just the main spaceship docking bays and the surrounding warehouses.

Beyond being confidential to the outside world, most of the sections were treated as secret even within the company. Of course, considering that this was effectively the Nightmare headquarters, it was a natural measure.

In any case, it was in the vast parts not on the map that the essence of Nightmare—in other words, the evidence for various crimes—should exist. That was why Rail had docked in that unknown section and was exploring the interior.

—However, it wasn't as if evidence for crimes was just lying around conveniently.Although he said he was exploring the interior, the current state of moving through a place that was excessively vast and whose location he didn't even know, while worrying about pursuers, was far from "exploring."For now, he had shaken off the guards, but this was the middle of enemy territory.

Surveillance cameras were everywhere. His movements were almost certainly being monitored, and if so, he didn't know when or from where pursuers might appear. The opponent wouldn't just let him do as he pleased.

In that case, what he could rely on was the movement of his comrades. Based on the time displayed on the corner of the monitor, it should be about time for Ryan and the others to start moving in earnest.I'm counting on you—if we miss this chance—

"Any word from Hecatoncheir!?"

"Still nothing!"The answer that came back to Ryan's unnecessary question was, as expected, something he didn't need to ask. If a communication had come in, the operator would have said so.

“—I'll contact you again.”

It hadn't been that long since the communication with Hecatoncheir, who had said that, had ended, but the time spent simply waiting felt far longer than when he was moving. He knew this was the other party buying time.If, during this time, the other party caught Rail and offered to hand him over, the plan would all be for nothing.

It would just end with Rail being dismissed. From here on, he couldn't afford to waste time."Request all gathering patrol ships!" Ryan roared. "Put pressure on Hecatoncheir! Tell them to approach, match relative velocity, and prepare to dock at any time!"

"The patrol fleet has begun to move!"A hurried atmosphere flowed through the main command room."They are approaching us! They are matching relative velocity!"

"Do they intend to put pressure on us...!"Jay groaned softly, then began to give instructions for the movement route of the powered suit squad he had sent to track the intruder.This was it.

From here on was the true moment of truth. Accurate judgment and swift action were required. No mistakes were allowed.How would the intruder move? When they made contact with the powered suit squad sent to track them, how would the target move and act? Everything had to be read, calculated, and executed perfectly.—No mistakes are allowed.

Suppressing his internal heartbeat, Jay muttered that in his heart.

The void wavered. A space with laws different from this world wavered, vanished, and gave birth to a single spaceship in the universe. A 210-meter catamaran. Docked upside down on its hull was a 50-meter shuttle. The spaceship—Swordbreaker.

"—Have they come...?" In the darkness—he slowly opened his eyes. As if waking from a long slumber. He had realized: the approach of the existence he must fight—the only existence with the power to destroy him.

There was still distance now. It would take a little more time before it became a full-scale battle.In that case——Slowly Albert Von Stargazer gazed into the void buried in darkness. And—he saw the situation in which this Hecatoncheir was placed.
No display was needed. Now, he could see everything, both inside and outside.
Including the scurrying of the little mice.

They were unnecessary for the true battle that would eventually come.
(—They're in the way) He thought so in a corner of his mind.In an instant, a glow was born. Before anyone could understand what it was, a stronger, more dazzling light flashed in the darkness of space.

"——Inspector Rail!" Suddenly, the operator’s urgent voice crackled through the helmet's internal speakers. It was the voice of a subordinate Rail had left behind on the docked patrol ship.

"What is it!?" In response to that abnormal tone, Rail's own voice was tinged with tension.The Hecatoncheir is——"Static! ...Crackle... Pop... Bzzzt...Suddenly, the transmission turned into noise."——What... happened...?"At the ominous premonition running down his spine, Rail stood frozen on the spot.

"...What... happened...?"Jay heard someone’s dazed mutter in the corner of his mind. As for what had happened—he had just seen it clearly on the monitors. However, his mind refused to acknowledge that it was reality.

One of the monitors showed the scattering remnants of a flash of light that had flared up just moments ago right next to the Hecatoncheir. And on another screen, a spear of light tore through the colors of space and pierced the approaching patrol ship――

The screen whited out from the explosive glare.

"――Report the situation!"

"――Y... Yes!"At Jay’s sharp rebuke, which brought him back to his senses, the other members finally regained their composure and frantically operated the control panels.

"...It was a bombardment from the Hecatoncheir..."The operator’s voice sounded somewhat detached from reality—as if it were someone else's problem.Jay knew that. He could see it for himself. This Hecatoncheir was conducting a bombardment. Against the Interstellar Police fleet.

"Who ordered the bombardment!?"

"...Well... that is... it’s a bombardment from the D-Level Block...!"――The D-Level Block――The sector under the direct control of Stargazer, which was a black box even to them.

(――It’s over――) Someone whispered inside Jay's chest. (――It’s over――for Nightmare――) There was no way they could get away with a stunt like this. No matter how much they were the greatest criminal organization in the galaxy.Jay wondered how many life-or-death situations he had survived to enter the organization and climb this high.

He had planned to eventually take over the organization and expand its influence even further. Both his ambitions and his past had all crumbled.
"――Stargazer!"Without even realizing he had called Stargazer without an honorific, Jay howled, turned on his heel, and left the main command room.

"――Lord Jay!?"The voice of someone calling out hit the closed door in vain and vanished.

"All ships, full reverse!"Ryan was screaming with all his might. He could not believe the sight unfolding before his eyes. Without any warning at all, the Hecatoncheir had begun bombarding the Interstellar Police fleet.In that instant, two patrol ships had turned into light, and Rail’s ship, which had been docked with the Hecatoncheir, was sunk without any means of resistance.

Ryan didn't know what had happened to Rail, who had infiltrated the fortress. No, to be honest, he no longer had the luxury to even think about such things.He couldn't understand it. The fact that the Hecatoncheir had opened fire.From Ryan's perspective, it was nothing less than a declaration of war by Nightmare against the Interstellar Police.

At the same time, it also meant a declaration of war against the Galactic Navy—and by extension, against all of humanity spread throughout the galaxy.No matter how much Nightmare boasted of being the largest organization in the galaxy, there was no way they could win a war against the entire galaxy.

Even with the high production capacity backed by the Gazer Konzern, the sheer volume of resources was fundamentally different in the first place. In other words—this was nothing other than self-destruction.

However, Nightmare was different from a group of small-time thugs. He couldn't imagine them being driven by impulse to start a fight that amounted to suicide. If so—why?In the end, without ever knowing the reason——Boom!With a blast from the Hecatoncheir, Ryan vanished from the world along with his spaceship.

Ryan had been mistaken. This bombardment was not a declaration of war from Nightmare against the galaxy. It was a declaration of war against every single living being.——From the "Spreader of Darkness," Dugradigdu——

When the request for mobilization came, everyone doubted their own ears. The request had followed formal procedures.

The Interstellar Police would handle the resolution and stabilization of an incident, and only when it was judged that the situation could not be suppressed with their military power could a request for mobilization be made to the Galactic Navy.

Here on the satellite Tisiphone, there was a fairly large-scale Galactic Navy base.After all, they were keeping an eye on the largest criminal syndicate in the galaxy. A scale like this was only natural.

──But──It wouldn't go beyond "keeping an eye on them." Ever. Everyone had thought so. Until just now. The Galactic Navy was, fundamentally, strictly a deterrent.

Only a complete fool or someone with a death wish would challenge the latest equipment and vast resources to a head-on fight.

That was the common way of thinking. At least until the incident in the Kahlua system a while back. Yet, even after that incident, no one had ever imagined that Nightmare would actually launch a head-on attack. An organization this massive usually became less reckless, if anything.

──Normally──speaking, that is. This was another case of that. However, the report brought in betrayed the "normalcy" that everyone believed in at every turn.The Nightmare headquarters, Hecatoncheir, had suddenly opened fire on the Interstellar Police patrol ships that had approached for an investigation, sinking nearly ten of them. It was an unbelievable story—but it was also a fact.

Since it was a fact──there was only one course of action for them to take.And so, hundreds of military ships took off from the base on Tisiphone.

"...What is going on...?"

The captain of the Interstellar Police patrol ship Peace Scouter muttered in shock at the scene unfolding before him.

By the time they arrived at the initial airspace following a request from the patrol ship Knight of the Fog, the approximately ten patrol ships that had gathered ahead of them were already preparing to dock with the Hecatoncheir.

──I'm late──

He regretted that for only a fleeting moment.

Before much time had passed, the sudden bombardment from the Hecatoncheir caused all the patrol ships that had approached to vanish as space debris.

Though they had managed to escape disaster for the time being by retreating in a hurry, the bombardment from the Hecatoncheir continued sporadically even now. He heard that a request for mobilization had been made to the military.

In any case, since the situation had turned out like this, there was no longer any role for them. With the armament of a patrol ship, they would only be a hindrance to the military.

"——Numerous objects have launched from the Hecatoncheir!"

Suddenly, an operator’s voice rose.

"What do you mean by 'objects'!?"

"Total length 50 meters! It's thought to be... small spaceships! They’re of an unknown model!"

"Put it on screen!"

Without a moment's delay, an image of black masses drifting near the Hecatoncheir appeared on the main screen. They called them "spaceships," but they didn't really look that way.

Shaped like tetrapods, the entirety was covered in a flat black exterior. They didn't appear to have weapons—or even propulsion systems. In the first place, it wasn't even clear if they really were spaceships, but if they were, they were certainly a type that hadn't existed until now.

"Due to being too close to the Hecatoncheir, accurate observation with sensors is impossible, but currently, there are about a hundred that can be observed optically! The total number is estimated to be about two hundred! They have deployed as if to surround the Hecatoncheir, and there has been no movement since!"

"...So they aren't... mobile weapons... then?"

"A notice from the Galactic Navy!"

Another person brought in a report.

"Evacuation advisory! All ships in the designated airspace must evacuate immediately!"

At the same time, a diagram of the designated airspace appeared on the display at the captain’s seat. At a glance, the captain understood.

"——Are they going to use that!?"

"...What's the matter?"

He looked at the first officer who asked anxiously——but the captain did not speak of his prediction. It had struck. A bombardment from the Hecatoncheir that should have clearly been out of range.

"——I'm going to settle this, Grandma."

Gazing blankly at the photograph of his grandmother projected on the display, Kane muttered softly. This was his private room on the Swordbreaker. It was very old photo data. The grandmother on the screen was still young and beautiful.

She was probably about twenty years old. Golden hair that reached her shoulders. Was it Kane's imagination that he felt a slight, faint shadow somewhere in her charming smile? That woman certainly possessed the remnants of the grandmother Kane knew personally.

The background was a place like any ordinary park. At the edge of the screen were the date of the photograph and the name "Maria Blueriver."

——That was the alias his grandmother had used all along.

Probably neither Kane’s parents nor his brother knew that "Maria" was an alias. Kane had always been somewhat out of place within the family. He was constantly compared to his brother, who was high-achieving in terms of grades, and he was told off about various things.

The only person Kane was attached to was his grandmother.

——Grandma’s real name isn't actually "Maria," you know——

When was it that Kane was first told that? Her real name was Alicia.

"Then——you're Grandma Alice."

He remembered his grandmother gazing at him with an intensely sad look when he called her Alice. Surely someone had called her that long ago. Someone she loved——and someone who was already gone.

His grandmother told him nothing more than that. Without saying anything——his grandmother passed away. Quietly leaving behind one spaceship for him.

──Kane. Take care of Canal for me──

Those were her final words. In the end, the fact that "Alicia" was her real name remained a secret between only Kane and his grandmother. Kane still did not know what she had kept hidden in her heart. Canal might know, but for some reason, he didn't feel like asking. However──

Kane thought that fulfilling the destiny Canal carried might be the true way to bid his grandmother farewell.

"………………"

Wearing a somewhat sad, wry smile, Millie stared intently at the gun in her hand. A paralysis gun──

A weapon that temporarily incapacitated the opponent──in other words, a weapon meant not to kill the opponent. She had used this all along. Yes, all this time. In Millie’s room on the Swordbreaker, she pulled out a trunk from under the bed.

The inside was empty when she opened it. It was a trunk she had brought with her every time she moved residences.

Clink...

She placed the paralysis gun inside and took a cutter knife from a small accessory box.

Tch... sss... rip...

She cut open the lining cloth on the inside of the trunk case──and what came out from there were a single photo panel and a single gun. Millie took the gun with her right hand and the photo panel with her left.

In the photograph, three people—a young man and woman, and a small blonde girl—were laughing.

They looked happy.

"...Father... Mother..." Millie whispered to her father and mother, who were no longer in this world.

The gun in her right hand was incredibly heavy. In reality, the weight wasn't that different from the paralysis gun. However, what was loaded in this gun were live rounds. In other words, a weapon for killing the opponent. What Millie's right hand was feeling was that weight.

She had thought that a time to use such a thing would probably never come. The reason she couldn't throw it away was that it was something her father had left behind. But——

A paralysis gun wouldn't do. Not after hearing Canal's story.

"I'll... settle this..." Millie muttered softly toward her parents in the photograph. "Because... I'll be the one to end the nightmare..."

"It’s Jay!"

Standing outside the black door, Jay raised his voice.

"——It is not the time for a regular report."

The old man’s voice heard through the door was extremely calm. Managing to hold back the urge to shout, Jay said in as suppressed a tone as possible, "It is an emergency report. An important matter has come to light."

There was no answer——but the door opened. Jay entered the room——and then stopped in his tracks. Nothing was different from usual. To the eyes.

However, the lingering darkness had certainly increased in its weight and gloom. He didn't know the cause. ——But he couldn't afford to flinch.

"It will be busy soon. Speak briefly," Stargazer said, standing in the center of the room. He didn't even try to look toward Jay.

"It is an important matter."

Repeating that, Jay reached inside his dark suit.

"Nightmare is already finished. You are insane. ——Therefore, I will eliminate you——"

Jay pulled the trigger of the drawn gun without hesitation.

A blue shining planet could be seen to the right. To the left, the land of the satellite Tisiphone, which had just launched, was visible. And in the center——far off, melting into the color of the void, was a stagnant, lingering black star.

Gazer Konzern Prototype Experimental Factory——no, the Nightmare fortress Hecatoncheir.

On the main screen of the bridge of the Galactic Navy flagship Sephiroth, the sight of countless spaceships lined up against such a background was projected. Among them were the figures of unusual things.

Their position was almost in the center of the fleet. Long, thin, needle-like units connected to cables extending from combat carriers. Several energy tubes extending from them were directly connected to an equal number of energy transport ships.

"Meteor Masher."

Long, thin energy discharge units split into several parts were fixed with arms, and the energy sent from the outside was discharged all at once. It was, so to speak, an ultra-gigantic beam cannon with a diameter of about 40 meters.

As the name suggested, it was originally intended for intercepting meteorites expected to collide with facilities on planets or satellites. There wasn't just one. There was a dozen of those units.

The plan was to first strike the Hecatoncheir with their full power, and then have the entire army begin its advance. While providing cover with bombardment and carrier-based aircraft, they would infiltrate the Hecatoncheir with assault landing craft and suppress it from the inside. That was the operation devised by the military.

It was an operation without holding back, but those in the Hecatoncheir were almost all members of Nightmare. They had judged that there was no need for mercy. There should have been no flaws in the operation.

No, perhaps even just the first volley of the Meteor Mashers might make the opponent surrender. If they still resisted even then, they would just have to fight normally at that time.

The objects launched from the Hecatoncheir that were thought to be small spaceships were just drifting around it. Even if these were some kind of combat units, their number was only two hundred at most.

In contrast, their own number was three hundred and fifty in ships alone. If mobile weapons like carrier-based aircraft were included, the number reached thousands. Even looking at it in terms of resources, it was an opponent they could sufficiently win against.

If they could fire the Meteor Mashers in rapid succession, they might even be able to settle things with just ultra-long-range bombardment from here, but unfortunately, due to the unstable and cheap system, something usually broke once it was fired.

However, firing once would be enough. Preparations for firing were already complete. Following the notice issued earlier, ships had evacuated from the firing axis of the Meteor Mashers.

"Commence operation! Meteor Masher firing countdown!"

On the bridge of the flagship Sephiroth, Admiral Kharkov of the Galactic Navy raised his voice sonorously. The fingertips of the operators slid over the control panels, and a computer-synthesized voice began the countdown.

Light-shielding processing was applied to the main screen and each external screen——

"...Three... Two... One..."

"Fire!"

At Kharkov's command, all monitors flashed with white light. The aftermath of the beam particles that overflowed all at once scattered into the vacuum and made the ship's hull tremble. Before long, all monitors returned to normal——

And what was projected there was, as everyone expected, the figure of the dying "Giant" spitting fire from here and there——

It was not. There was absolutely no change to the black star. What was burning red was the surface of the blue planet projected on the right of the screen——the planet Lozolde.

"...Wh...!?"

Anxiety surged. No one could understand the situation.

"What happened!?"

At Kharkov's voice, which was close to a roar, the operators' movements became frantic. It couldn't be a misfire. After many checks, all aim had been undoubtedly directed toward the Hecatoncheir.

"——Ac... According to the report from the patrol planes..."

One of the operators raised their voice. And then, there was no continuation. As if they were hesitant to report.

"What's wrong! Continue!"

At Kharkov's reprimand, the operator finally continued. In a voice almost like a scream.

"——No damage to the target Hecatoncheir! All Meteor Masher rounds, just before the target——changed their trajectory! They all struck the surface of the planet Lozolde!"

"——Tr... Trajectory... changed!? Beams traveling through outer space!?"

At that report, even Kharkov was speechless. Interference by Lozolde's gravity—there was no way. If Lozolde had such gravity, both the Hecatoncheir and this fleet should have fallen toward Lozolde a long time ago.

"What is the reason the trajectory changed!?"

"...It is... unknown!"

To the question he finally managed to utter, the answer that came back was an incredibly unreliable one. What Kharkov considered as a possibility was a powerful electromagnetic barrier—in other words, the beams were bent by applying magnetic interference.

Though—he had never even heard of an electromagnetic barrier that could bend the high-output beams fired by the Meteor Mashers.

"...I see! Since there is a Galactic Navy base right in front of them, the enemy had measures against bombardment from ultra-long ranges too, I suppose!"

Kharkov muttered to himself in a voice that was intentionally louder than necessary so that others could hear him. At the very beginning, in a place like this, he couldn't afford to let the morale of his allies be crushed.

"Contact all ships!"

Kharkov raised his voice. There was no longer a trace of agitation in his attitude.

"Our first bombardment was blocked! The enemy is wary of us and has countermeasures against long-range bombardment! However, that does not shake our victory! The difference in military power remains obvious! Therefore, from now on, all ships will approach the Hecatoncheir by high-speed movement! We will annihilate the target through medium and short-range combat..."

Light——flashed. A sphere of light appeared in the center of the lined-up fleet. Following that——

Voom!

A shockwave that shook the hull. They had received a bombardment. The Meteor Mashers had. From the Hecatoncheir. It was impossible.

Being able to aim at the Hecatoncheir with their Meteor Mashers from this distance was due to the enormous beam output and the target's massive total length of 20 kilometers. In contrast, the body of the Meteor Masher, from their perspective, was less than 50 meters in diameter. Considering the distance between them, it was something like the eye of a needle.

It was something that became possible only by possessing both an output comparable to the Meteor Masher and a shooting accuracy several times—no, dozens of times—greater than it. There was no way such a thing could exist. Yes, there was no way.

"All ships, begin advance! Do not fear a lucky hit!"

All Kharkov could do was dismiss it as a mere fluke and give the order to launch. And so——the march began.

——The assassination of Stargazer——

That was something that had been in Jay's mind for a while. From the time he entered the organization until he met Stargazer directly, such ambitions were also in his heart.

However, after seeing the old man directly and knowing him to be an existence beyond his reach, Jay had abandoned that ambition. ――It wasn't that the ambition had reared its head again.

The assassination of Stargazer that was once in a corner of his mind was certainly due to his ambition. However, the plan that dominated his mind now was, rather, due to a strange sense of duty that even resembled an obsession.

Initially, he intended to use the intruders. He would control the intruders' movements with the pursuit team and corner them into the core. He would intentionally expand the commotion and assassinate Stargazer in the meantime. He would make it so that the culprit was another organization's assassin who had slipped into the Interstellar Police.

――Of course, there was no way the other members would be convinced by such a cheap script. If Jay took control of the organization immediately after, rumors of assassination would naturally follow.

However, with the series of indiscriminate killing incidents, distrust toward Stargazer was beginning to rise even within the organization. Besides, if he left the old man as he was, the survival of the organization itself was at risk. If so, he had to do it. That was what he thought. But――

The bombardment of the patrol ships shattered that script. Along with the future of the criminal organization Nightmare. No, far from the organization's future, even their own lives were at risk.

On the nearby satellite, Tisiphone, was a Galactic Navy base. By now, a request for mobilization had probably been made, and perhaps the fleet had already set out. Knowing that this was the Nightmare headquarters, the military wouldn't show mercy either.

If they stayed like this with their hands tied, there was a high probability they would become space debris along with the Hecatoncheir. In that case, there were only two ways to be saved. Surrender or escape.

However, if he tried to escape the Hecatoncheir, the insane old man might even sink that escape pod. Even if he were to surrender, as long as Stargazer continued to attack, no matter how much Jay sent surrender transmissions, they probably wouldn't deal with him. In any case――

To avoid a head-on collision with the military, the elimination of Stargazer was indispensable. No, rather――

After eliminating the old man, he would escape and make the Hecatoncheir self-destruct. On top of that, if he made everything out to be Stargazer's rampage, he could wipe out the evidence of organized crime along with the Hecatoncheir, and it was even possible to keep the organization in existence.

If so, he had only one choice to take. He would shoot the old man, who was looking away, without warning. One shot to the forehead. One shot to the chest. With Jay's marksmanship, it should have been an easy task. It was supposed to be, but――

"――When was it that you first came to this room?"

The old man was still standing there.

"In any case――if you cannot accept this darkness――"

Holding a glowing blade of light in his hand.

"You cannot serve as my replacement."

Knowledge of that weapon was in Jay's mind. A Psy-Blade. It was a weapon used by the military's close-combat units.

It used human spiritual power as an energy source and turned it into a blade of light; originally, it was built into power suits and consisted of three parts: a bandana-like receptor worn on the forehead, a small amplifier, and an oscillator like a sword hilt.

But the old man held only the oscillator. He wasn't wearing a receptor on his forehead, and no cable that should connect to an amplifier could be seen from the oscillator. With this, there was no way the energy blade would manifest.

――With human spiritual power, that is.

Jay could not understand anything. Why the old man, who should have been shot dead, was standing safely, holding an energy blade that should not manifest. Without concern, the old man continued his words.

"It is a matter of no importance. Now. About the organization and such. A criminal organization was very convenient for spreading upheaval and gathering 'fear.' To me, it was just that kind of story. Funds also gathered as a byproduct. But now that sufficient power has gathered, those no longer matter. ...For you, who cannot accept 'me,' it is likely a story you wouldn't understand."

Certainly, the words he said were completely nonsensical to Jay. Even if he asked more questions, he probably wouldn't get a satisfying answer. Forever. Therefore——

Jay fired the next bullet instead of words. ——This time he saw it. The old man's right hand blurred, and the afterimage of light swept through the void. It was precisely the space Jay had aimed at. And——finally, Jay realized.

The energy blade manipulated by Stargazer had knocked down every single one of the flying bullets. Having realized——

Thud!

A small hole was pierced in the center of Jay's forehead. While parrying the bullets, Stargazer had swung the energy blade and shot through his head.

No longer even glancing at the collapsing Jay, Stargazer returned his gaze to the pitch-black space. As if nothing had happened.

"...A little more... 'fear' is needed, perhaps..." Stargazer muttered softly.

The main command room was in a state of panic. They had already confirmed that the military had set out from the satellite Tisiphone toward them. In this emergency, there were no instructions from Stargazer, and Jay, the number two, had also rushed out and there was no contact.

"Transmission from the military is in!"

As soon as someone said that, the image on the main screen switched, showing an elderly man in military uniform.

"This is Admiral Kharkov of the Galactic Navy Fleet S-080F. I will only say this once. I am notifying all staff of the Hecatoncheir. Cease bombardment immediately, and after disarming, surrender. If you do not comply, we will begin our attack as soon as we enter our attack range. That is all."

He spoke unilaterally in a high-handed manner and cut the transmission without further discussion.

…………………………

――A silence similar to the bottom of the water filled the room――

"――This isn't a joke!"

One of the operators stood up from his seat. "I can't deal with this! I'm getting out of here!"

"Wait! Don't leave your post! It's a violation of orders!"

To another person's restraint, however, the man said without hesitation, "No order like 'don't run' has come from anywhere!"

He spoke and headed toward the room's entrance.

……………………

The group was silent for a while――

Without a word, several more stood up from their seats and headed for the door. There was no longer anyone to stop them. The first man passed through the door into the corridor――and stopped moving on the spot. He returned to the room immediately――

"What is the meaning of this!?" he yelled with an expression of anger. "The bulkheads are down!"

"――That can't be!"

One person who was still in their seat hurriedly checked the display at their hand――

"――Impossible! Since when...!? There was no record of closing them, nor was there any display of closure!"

"Just open it!" the man who first stood up shouted. "I'm not going to be trapped in a place like this!"

However――

"――It's no use! It won't accept control from here!"

The desperate answer came back. Silence fell over the room again――

――Sssssssssssssssss...――

What was heard in that silence was the faint sound of flowing air.

"...What... is that sound...?"

The staff hurriedly set about checking the situation――

"...You've got to be kidding me...?"

The one who muttered that in a hopeless tone was one of them.

"...Why...? Something like this...? Who...?"

"What's wrong!?"

"...All areas of the Hecatoncheir... except for the core..."

Slowly, the man turned around and spoke. Wishing it were a bad dream.

"...The air is... being exhausted... little by little... slowly..."

In order to bring a slow death by suffocation to the humans inside the Hecatoncheir. And so, the Nightmare headquarters turned into hell――

The bombardment from the Hecatoncheir against the invading Galactic Navy continued intermittently. The bombardment, which should have clearly been from out of range, had sunk over a dozen ships by now.

Nevertheless, during that time, the Galactic Navy fleet continued its approach at the maximum speed that did not disrupt their formation. And then――

"All ships, prepare to fire main guns!"

Admiral Kharkov’s order reached all ships. "At the same time as entering range, all ships, simultaneous fire!"

"...But Admiral..."

An adjutant standing nearby muttered in a low voice from the side.

――The enemy has countermeasures against long-range attacks――

It was Kharkov himself who had said that earlier.

"――I know. That is exactly why we are doing it. In order to probe the enemy's hand."

After also answering in a low voice, he gave the next instruction to the fleet again.

"Put the image of the target on the main screen! Notify each patrol ship! Each detector, observe and record the target's data in detail, and analyze it!"

Then, on the main screen of the Sephiroth, the black figure of the Hecatoncheir captured at maximum magnification was projected.

"Admiral! Communication from all ships! All ships, preparation for bombardment complete!"

"Ten more to range entry!"

The operator's countdown began. An accompanying destroyer received a bombardment from the Hecatoncheir and became a mass of white light.

"...Five! Four! Three! Two... Target, captured in range!"

"All ships, fire!"

"All ships, fire!"

The operator repeated Kharkov’s command――and a group of white arrows of light filled the pitch-black space with the color of light.

The planet Lozolde was in a state of confusion and fear. The Hecatoncheir in satellite orbit had begun combat with the Interstellar Police――

When that special news first flowed, the people living on the surface of Lozolde, while half-doubting their own ears, thought this as if it were someone else’s problem.

――Ah. Has this time finally come? ――They thought.

If one was a person living on this planet, even a child knew that the black shadow floating in satellite orbit was practically the headquarters of the criminal syndicate Nightmare.

While they also thought that an organization as large as Nightmare wouldn't do something like pick a head-on fight with the Interstellar Police or the Galactic Navy—on the other hand, everyone vaguely thought that such a time would eventually come too. And that became a reality today. It was just that kind of thing.

Furthermore, an incident reported through a TV screen was something far above the people's heads. Somewhere, it lacked a sense of reality.

——Until the pillars of light that came down from the sky vanished one city and tens of thousands of lives in an instant.

Whether it was a stray shot, or whether it was done intentionally. In any case, people realized that this surface was by no means a safe zone.

"Please refrain from going out and be sufficiently on guard."

A news anchor projected on a large street monitor called for silly caution. No matter how much one was on guard, there was no way to block spears of energy when it wasn't even known when or where they would fall. All the towns were in a panic.

Those who were trying to escape somewhere. Those who turned into rioters. Those who decided to take advantage of the confusion to be looters at a fire.

"——The sky!"

Someone’s scream of terror froze the movement of the insane town. ——In the sky——a rain of light was falling.

"...What... was... that... just now...?"

After a long—long silence. This was all Kharkov could mutter. He couldn't believe the sight he had just seen. Probably, for the other crew members as well, it was the same thing. The simultaneous fire of the fleet by Kharkov’s order.

In the main screen of the bridge, toward the black lingering mass—the Hecatoncheir—countless lights flew——and in that moment of direct hit, the figure of the Hecatoncheir blurred blue for an instant.

And the rain of light fired by the fleet, as if it were only natural, changed its trajectory—no, it suddenly bent and rained down on the planet Lozolde.

* * *

Once, there was a civilization in the galaxy. It was a story from long before humanity, who had Earth as its place of origin, advanced into space. They lived divided among many planets and achieved prosperity. However——

They, who were caught in the shackles of genes called living organisms, were also unable to escape from the destiny of conflict.

——What on earth was the beginning——

By now, it was a matter of no importance. At any rate, differences in values gave birth to two large forces——and before long, a fierce battle that divided the galaxy in two began. Many planets were destroyed, people were exhausted——and then one side succeeded in the development of a certain mechanism.

Interfering with a certain kind of "power" with specific mental waves or patterns of intracranial electricity caused by visual recognition, and temporarily obstructing the exchange of bio-energy——that is, a system to extinguish the light of life by the emotion one holds—"fear."

——Feeding on fear and killing people—isn't it just like a demon from legend?
——Someone said so. Thus, that system was named "System Darkstar." Taking the name of the legendary demon king, the "Spreader of Darkness," Dugradigdu.

* * *

"All ships, cease bombardment!"

Kharkov hurriedly raised his voice. But there was no need to be ordered. At that too-abnormal situation, everyone had stopped their bombardment.

"What was that phenomenon just now!? Report!"

"Agh! Currently under analysis!"

The operator hurriedly answered Kharkov’s roar. "...But... the data is strange...! All patrol plane sensors have obtained data that, at the moment of the direct hit, the target vanished, and at the same time, for an instant, a gigantic mass was perceived. It is thought that probably, each sensor was blinded by powerful jamming waves."

"...In other words... it’s unanalyzable, is that it?"

"...Probably..."

The operator shrank back and spoke ambiguously. The cause was unknown. But one thing that was understood was this: bombardment would only cause damage to the planet Lozolde.

"Notify all ships!"

Recovering himself, Kharkov’s voice no longer had a trace of agitation. "The effect of an attack by long-range energy cannons against the enemy is thin! Therefore, the entire fleet will conduct close combat against the target! All carriers, prepare to launch carrier-based aircraft! Each assault landing craft, prepare to launch!"

The encrypted order reached throughout the fleet. And then——

"The bombardment from the Hecatoncheir is——!"

"What is it!?"

To the operator's scream, Kharkov asked in a voice that desperately suppressed his internal irritation. If possible, he didn't want any more annoying reports. ——But. The operator continued his words.

"The Hecatoncheir has begun bombarding the planet Lozolde!"

"What!?"

Kharkov had unintentionally raised his voice. Looking at the main screen, from the black satellite drifting in the darkness toward the glowing blue planet, a rain of light was falling.

"——What... are they intending...? What meaning is there in that!?"

Facing an incomprehensible enemy, a chill was rising in Kharkov’s spine.

The developed "System Darkstar" was to be mounted on a single unmanned ship. The first prototype ship, bearing the demon king’s name, Dugradigdu.

The reason it was mounted on an unmanned ship was simple. A system to protect the crew from this system, which exhibited its effect indiscriminately, was still in the middle of development.

However, leaving aside its anti-personnel annihilation ability, when seen as an automated ship, its combat ability could by no means be called high due to matters such as the mounting space for the mechanism. So, for the escort of the Dugradigdu, five space ships were constructed.

Automated combat ships named Gofunshou 毒牙爪 (Poison Fang Claw), Gufuukyuu 颶風弓 (Hurricane Bow), Reikkou no Ken 烈光の剣 (Sword of Raging Light), Shungekki Sou 瞬撃槍 (Instant Strike Spear), and Hashintsui 破神槌 (God-Breaking Hammer), respectively, after the five weapons held by the legendary demon king.

The energy for each ship, in order to make long-term operational action possible, adopted a method of taking in human spiritual power from the outside. In the midst of battle, the mental wavelengths that were easiest to extract——that is, fear, hatred, and sadness. Such negative spirits. And so——darkness was unleashed into space.

Fear—is wanted. Further fear.

He closed the bulkheads of all the sectors where humans were and slowly drained the air from the inside. In order to make them thoroughly realize their own death.

Sweet fear overflowed inside the Hecatoncheir for a while——and before long, it all vanished.

——Since the dead do not produce fear——

But now. From the surface of the blue planet spreading below his eyes, countless "fears" were arising. The bombardment was not such a fatal thing.

The beams, whose power was reduced by the planet's atmosphere, would probably only have enough power left to crush a small building by the time they reached the surface. But that was fine. The dead do not produce fear.

Humans who were unlucky enough to be directly hit by the falling bombardment would end their lives without even the time to hold fear. Those who survived and saw that sight——those who imagined that the next victim of the bombardment might be themselves—were the ones who produced infinite fear.

And that "fear" was exactly what gave "him" further power. Now, the planet Lozolde had become a ranch for producing "fear."

What was wrong with the Dugradigdu——in the end, no one knew.

There were those who said it was a rampage of the program, and there was a theory that interference by the negative consciousness that had become energy removed the shackle of "not attacking allies." And some said: a rampage is natural.

To create an existence that feeds on fear and spreads death——it is nothing other than bringing back the demon king through science. In any case——

It was a fact that as soon as the Dugradigdu went out into space, it turned its bow one hundred and eighty degrees and made the planet and people who gave birth to it the first sacrifice of "System Darkstar."

"——What——is happening——?"

Wrapped in a power suit, Rail muttered in a daze. First, the bulkheads came down. A plan to shut him in—that was what he thought at first.

But he had been thinking about the possibility of bulkheads being lowered from the beginning. A terminal for line intrusion was installed on the arm of the power suit. If he slipped into the line with that, it would take some time, but he could open the bulkheads one by one. Rail immediately set to that task.

Meanwhile, the power suit’s external sensors brought information that the outside air was becoming thin. It was from around that time that he began to think it was strange. And when was it that he opened which door——

"——!?"

Rail was frozen on the spot. A person. A woman was lying there. The sensors indicated that the air in the corridor was thinned to near a vacuum. Of course, there was no way a human could stay alive in this. The woman was dead. With an expression of agony and terror carved on her face. She was probably a staff member of this Hecatoncheir.

(――Were you caught in the plan to shut me in? ――Don't think badly of me. If you're going to resent someone, resent yourself for being in a place like this――) Rail thought, and he opened the next bulkhead――

There was a corpse there too. Next. And the next. And the next after that. There were also those who were dead, crowded around the storage doors for emergency simple space suits. The storage doors were completely locked. The number of dead wouldn't be stopped at ten or so.

――Just from what Rail had seen so far. It wasn't normal. No matter what, there was no way they would do something like this to kill Rail alone. If so――if so, why was it? Rail had no idea of the reason.

For the time being, what he understood was—apparently the situation had already surpassed the stage of gathering evidence of Nightmare’s crime.

――For now――I need to find an information terminal and check the situation――

Rail opened the next bulkhead for now――and there, it was.

The battle in the previous civilization continued endlessly. All the stars were exhausted, and everyone was completely tired of the battle. But even so――the time for the battle to end did not come.

The side that became advantageous suddenly received a great blow, and messengers of peace vanished as space debris without even reaching their destination.

The rampaging Dugradigdu and the five spaceships bearing the names of the demon king’s weapons were slowly spreading "ruin" while maintaining the balance of power between both sides. Of course――

The military high command of the camp that developed the Dugradigdu knew that. But. What was initially considered was to use that and lead the battle to their advantage.

――After all, it was just a tool they created that was rampaging――

That was also a fact that such a perception existed.

――If left as it is, it will fall into a crisis of the species itself, let alone the win or loss of the war――

By the time they finally realized it, the population had already decreased sharply. A system to cancel "System Darkstar"—there was no time to develop such a thing from scratch. If so, there was only one way. To defeat it. The Dugradigdu.

But even then, there was a problem.

As long as the opponent possessed the "System Dark Star," it was impossible to send manned warships. Naturally, it followed that unmanned automated ships should be dispatched, but—

There was no way they could send anything similar to the "Dugradigdu" or its five escorts.

The cause of the rampage remained unclear, but considering six ships had been affected simultaneously, there was a high possibility that the problem lay within the power system itself, which fed on "Fear." If that were the case, they had to provide a system powered by a different kind of heart. Specifically, Hope. The positive will possessed by humans.

"――What――is――happening――?"

Witnessing that sight, one of them muttered those words in a daze.

The powered suit squad that had set out to capture the intruders upon receiving orders was now completely bewildered by an unexpected situation. They had heard the intruders' current location and followed the shortest route toward them—

The bulkhead had descended all of a sudden. Some were nearly crushed between the doors. In the end, the squad was split up and isolated.

"What do you mean? I haven't heard anything about this!"

Finally pulling himself out of the initial confusion, the squad leader attempted to contact the main command room—but there was no one to respond. At this point, the air inside had not yet been vented.

However, with the Space Force mobilizing, the main command room was already facing issues far more pressing than capturing intruders. Then—someone noticed. The air in the corridor was slowly being sucked out.

"Is it sabotage by the intruders!?"

That was the thought that crossed the squad leader's mind. Or rather, it was the only possibility he could think of.

"In any case, we're moving forward! Secure the target as quickly as possible!"

He ordered the subordinates who remained with him, and they resumed their advance. The passwords to open each bulkhead had not been changed. The squad proceeded, opening the doors one by one. And then—they came across their fallen comrades, one after another.

"……This is horrible……"

"Make haste. There is nothing we can do for them. The only thing we can do is capture the intruder as soon as possible and do something about this state of affairs."

(—However, after doing all this, I don't intend to let them off with just a limb or two—)

Boiling with hatred in his heart, he opened the door leading to the next area—and there it was. Its diameter was perhaps about one meter. It had a black, flat, circular body with multiple sensor eyes on the front. Five legs—no, work arms—extended from the main body. Of course, they knew exactly what it was.

A "Blacksmith"—The maintenance machine of the "Hecatoncheir."

Usually, they moved around behind the walls, primarily performing checks on various systems and repairing malfunctions. That was what they had heard. In fact, they had occasionally seen them out in the corridors repairing something.

—However—

The sight of them—numbering perhaps ten or twenty—clinging tightly to the walls and ceiling of the corridor was terrifying—uncountable sensors stared at them silently. The squad leader realized. Not through reason, but by instinct.

"They're being controlled! They're enemies!"

As he spoke, he readied his right hand and fired the beam gun built into his arm without hesitation. He couldn't use heavy weaponry in a place like this, but the opponent was merely a repair device. Its exterior, which couldn't even be called armor, should have been easily pierced, turning it into scrap metal.

—Or so it should have been. But.

Jyun!

The needle of light, which possessed more than enough killing power, simply scattered in all directions. It wasn't unscathed—but it was hardly effective.

"……Wha……!?"

Of course, he did not know. He did not know that the black body was made of the same material as the Lost Ships. And then, the "Blacksmith's" work arm moved. The maintenance beam fired from its tip easily pierced through the chest plate of the powered suit.

—Wha—

—In the end. Understanding nothing. Knowing nothing. The squad leader drew his last breath inside the iron coffin shaped like a human.

"……Wha…… What was that!?"

"What's going on!?"

Toward the remaining crew members who were thrown into a panic—countless "Blacksmiths" rushed in.

And then—on a deserted, uninhabited planet, the spaceship designed to defeat the "Dugradigdu" was completed.

The battle-seal ship "Vorfeed," named after a god found in legends—the Pitch-Black Dragon God. To ensure it could handle combat with escort ships to some extent, it was equipped with newly developed Leap Railguns and high-output Plasma Blasts.

Its most significant feature was the Eraser System, which applied amplification chips used during Plasma Blast firing. By utilizing the fact that it used a mental wavelength opposite to that of the "Dugradigdu," which fed on negative consciousness, the system neutralized the energy of both sides and caused the engines to stall.

—However—

The one that launched a surprise attack and annihilated the development base was not the "Dugradigdu," but a fleet of the enemy army who knew nothing of the circumstances. They had no doubt that it was a newly built ship intended for use against them.

"——Incoming!"

It happened at the same time. The suddenness of Canal raising her voice coincided with Kane maneuvering the ship into evasive action.

Gou!

A split second later, a white light that raked through the void passed right beside the hull. The plasma storm created by the aftermath of the massive energy shook the body of the "Swordbreaker" violently.

"......Wha......! What!? What was that just now!?"

Milly raised a panicked voice.

"It's artillery fire from an ultra-long range."

"......Artillery fire...... you say......"

Milly frowned at Canal's nonchalant answer. She was well aware that the opponent was also a Lost Ship, just like them. It wouldn't be strange for there to be artillery fire from an extraordinary distance.

However—even taking into account that it was a Lost Ship, what just happened was far beyond common sense. After all, not even a shadow of the enemy appeared on the radar. In that case, there were only two possibilities. Either they had deceived the radar's eyes, or it was artillery fire from outside the radar range.

If they were fooling a radar manufactured with current human technology, that would be understandable. But this ship was also a Lost Ship.

"They likely sensed our approach and struck first," Canal said. "The opponent is the five hundred and fifty meter long, ultra-long-range bombardment ship 'Bodigar'!"

As she spoke, the image of a spaceship with a conical basic form was projected onto the display. It wasn't an actual image. It was something pulled from the data stored within the "Swordbreaker"—no, within the "Vorfeed."

The image quickly switched to show black dots arranged in a regular pentagon, then to a close-up of one of those dots. It was a black mass, nearly spherical. And Canal's explanation continued.

"Small aiming chips, in sets of five, are scattered in advance from the point where the main body exists toward this area of space—those chips capture our form and also interfere with and correct the trajectory of the high-output energy cannon that was fired to hit the target—They are an opponent that excels at ultra-long-range sniping."

"……Wait…… Hey! Another one of those opponents that feels like they're cheating……!"

"It's alright."

Interrupting Milly's protest, Canal gave a small smile.

"Their greatest weakness is that, due to their nature, the energy consumption is too high. Once they fire a shot, it takes a while until the next one can be fir……"

Before the explanation could even finish, Kane suddenly took evasive action again—

Gugaaaaa!

The light passed by in close proximity.

"Until the next shot can be —what!?"

Kane tossed out the sarcasm, but Canal did not answer. She stood there, her expression gone.

"……No way…… This is impossible. It's too different from the data……"

"What do you mean!?"

"It's too different from the data! No! Even from the calculations! Considering its mass, it's theoretically impossible to generate enough energy potential to fire rapidly in this amount of time!"

"Calm down! Canal!"

Kane's reprimand flew toward Canal, who was unusually flustered.

"I don't care about the logic, the enemy is actually firing! The problem is how we're going to respond! I dodged those last two on a hunch, but there's no guarantee my hunches will keep hitting forever!"

"The main body aside, those chips you mentioned aren't that far away from us, right?" Milly cut in from the side. "From what I just heard, if we just find those chips and crush them, the opponent is just a moving cannon, right?"

"——That is correct——" Canal answered in a low voice. "……If we can find and hit chips that are only four meters in diameter, have black bodies with simple stealth functions, and use gas propulsion so they don't even emit light, that is."

Overlapping with her voice, Kane took a third evasive action. Once again, the light slipped past the side of the hull. Milly nodded at Canal's desperate words.

"——Alright. I'll give it a try."

"——But——"

Taken aback by how easily she said it, even Canal was momentarily speechless.

"……Give it a…… try…… you say…… Is trying going to do anything about this!?"

"Have you ever heard the phrase 'no harm in trying'?"

Without stopping her hands as they slid over the fire control panel, Milly asked without hesitation, leaving Canal with no choice but to sigh.

"……I understand…… I'll lend you a bit of help. ——There are points where the trajectory has refracted in the previous shots. The position has shifted all three times, which means the group of aiming chips is moving. Based on the time interval of the artillery fire, the distance the trajectory change points moved, and my data, I will predict the movement speed of the aiming chips and narrow down the area of space where they are currently thought to exist."

As she spoke, she completed the calculation in an instant—

In that moment, Canal felt she somewhat understood the sensation Kane sometimes described as "feeling dizzy." It was wide. Extremely wide. Anyway, it was wide.

"……It's around here……"

Saying so almost in desperation, Canal sent that data to Milly. To hit a tiny chip at this distance and range without even being able to specify the opponent's position—it felt as though a dart thrown backward would be more likely to hit a needle hole ten meters away.

But Milly paid no mind to such things.

"Okay. That helps. I can narrow down the range quite a bit with this."

"……………………Um…… Excuse me…… Milly…… Do you see all those 'zeros' lined up at the bottom of the screen, enough to fill it……?"

"This tiny display? ……Oh. It says '16' only at the very end…… What is it?"

"Hit probability."

"……………………"

"……………………"

The two fell silent for a while as Kane's evasions and the streaks of light brushing past the exterior caused the ship to tremble slightly.

"——According to this data, those aiming chips function in sets of five, right?"

"……Yes, but……"

When Canal answered the question, Milly nodded with satisfaction.

"Then if we take down one chip, it stops functioning! That means the actual hit probability is five times this, isn't it! Piece of cake!"

—No—that number was calculated with that in mind, too—Canal swallowed the words before she could say them. Sensing it would be useless to speak.

"Well then——here I go!"

Milly's hand slid over the control panel—the moment Kane dodged the fifth shot from the unseen enemy.

"——Right there!"

With a surge of spirit, Milly's hand reached for the fire key! Aiming for the refraction point of the enemy's energy streak!

Kou!

The brilliance of several beams fired from the "Swordbreaker" tore through the void and—did nothing but tear through it.

"You didn't hit it, Milly!"

"That's why I said it was impossible to hit," Canal said with a sigh as she joined Kane's heckling.

"Shut up! I'll hit it this time!"

Saying so, she operated the control panel again—

"There!"

Once again, the lance of light she fired raced through the void. At the same time, a torrent of light approached from the distant reaches of space! Just before the lance of light and the torrent were about to pass each other at a certain point—one of the streaks fired by the "Swordbreaker" suddenly burst and scattered in the void.

Simultaneously, the torrent of light changed its direction as if writhing, then scattered and vanished into the pitch-black universe.

"……Eh……? No way……?" Canal muttered in a daze.

Yes. It had hit. Milly's shot. One of the tiny chips drifting in the void.

"I hit it!"

"No wayyyyyyy!?"

In contrast to Milly, who raised a cry of joy, Canal grabbed her head and screamed.

"I mean, sure, in terms of probability, as long as the possibility isn't a complete zero, this kind of thing might happen, but even so, it's just so unscientific, or should I say...... How did you hit it!? Milly!?"

To Canal's confused question, Milly proudly held up a single finger.

"I felt a bloodlust. Somehow."

"Aaaaahhhhh. Another one of those unscientific things."

"Probability aside, a result is a result," Kane cut in from the side. "Anyway, does this mean there won't be any artillery fire from that 'Bodigar' thing for a while?"

"That should be the case. ——However, it's only 'for a while.' Considering the direction the fire came from, it should be at its headquarters—over by the 'Hecatoncheir.' If that's the case, then naturally, if we get closer—"

"——I see—— ......By the way, there's one thing I wanted to ask——"

"What is it?"

"......If 'they'...... use that anti-personnel slaughter weapon——'System Dark Star,' is there any way to prevent it?" Kane asked. The death curse of the inverted pentagram that had driven many fleets and planets to extinction—

"They won't use it," Canal said simply to the question. "The use of 'System Dark Star' requires a fair amount of energy. And it intends to fight 'Vorfeed,' not 'a human named Kane.' Even if it activates that system, it won't have any effect on 'Vorfeed' itself. In other words, to it, that would be nothing more than a waste of energy. Therefore—it won't use it."

"......I see......" Kane said, ending the conversation. It was clear now. Even so, if it were used—not even Canal would have a way to prevent it.

—On that planet, it alone had survived. The battle-seal ship "Vorfeed." While its system had been activated for intercept, the base was annihilated before it could be deployed. Buried amidst crushed rubble and soil, it thought of only one thing. Specifically, the subjugation of the "Dugradigdo."

How much time had passed? It repaired damaged parts, sought ways to reach the surface, repeated various trials and errors, learned, and progressed. Eventually, it applied automatic repair devices to manufacture something like a drilling machine, and by the time it crawled out onto the surface—there was no one left in the universe—

* * *

"The aiming chip was destroyed, was it."

Standing alone in the darkness, Stargazer muttered softly. A slight tinge of astonishment was mixed into his voice, but it was not directed at the "Swordbreaker"; rather, it was toward the coincidence that probability had birthed.

If one knew the capabilities of the "Bodigar," destroying the aiming chips was a countermeasure anyone would think of. However, to put it into practice, one had to slip through a probability that was near zero. He was unsure of the details of how it was destroyed, but he judged that likely one shot out of many fired at random had happened to hit by ill luck.

The "Swordbreaker" had been carrying out ultra-long-range bombardment via five sets of aiming chips. If the one at the very edge was crushed—there would be a bit of time before it could fire again. In that case—

"I suppose I'll crush the worthless trash before the real battle begins——"

The old man's eyes peered through the deep darkness toward the Space Force fleet that was approaching.

* * *

—Destruction for the sake of destruction. Slaughter for the sake of slaughter. The "Dugradigdo" who repeated those acts were in a state of extreme exhaustion. It was natural. After all, they had completely annihilated the humans who produced "Fear," the source of their power. Of course, they had no regrets. They existed for that very purpose.

There were no longer any opponents left to destroy. However, they had plenty of time. If life were born in some other place, civilization were to bloom, and its reach were to extend to space—fear would be born once again. They would gather strength and once more hunt every living thing to extinction. That was fine. Until that time came, they could just drift quietly in the universe. That was what they thought.

—Until the "Vorfeed" arrived—

"Second Fleet carrier 'Blue Sunfish' power reactor hit! Communication lost!"

"Eleventh Fleet battleship 'Scarlet Horse' bridge hit! No response!"

"Fourth Fleet destroyer 'Cyan Barracuda' sunk!"

The reports coming in one after another were all about damage to their allies. It might have been natural. While the bombardment from the "Hecatoncheir" continued, they had not fired their main cannons even once. Even if they fired, if it were only going to be bent back toward Planet Lusolde, it was better not to fire at all. Even so—this state of affairs could not continue forever.

And so, Admiral Kharkov made a decision. Standing tall on the bridge, he sent orders to the entire fleet.

"——Launch all shipborne aircraft and landing craft! Head for the target at full speed, with the primary objective being the destruction of each gun turret and internal infiltration!"

"——It's too early! Admiral!"

His adjutant raised a voice of panic at the order that ignored standard theory. Infiltration of fortresses is typically done by sending powered suits via landing craft after suppressing the airspace with attacks from fighters and attackers following a naval bombardment—in other words, after securing an entry route. Launching shipborne aircraft and landing craft at this distance was too early by any standard. At this rate, the units would take significant damage before reaching the "Hecatoncheir."

But Kharkov spoke in a hushed voice that only the adjutant could hear.

"Looking at the situation, we must admit it now. ……In terms of firing accuracy, defensive power, and offensive power…… they surpass us in every aspect. The only thing we have over the enemy is numbers. If we do this by the book, both the aircraft and landing craft units will end up being sunk along with their carriers before they can even launch!"

"……B-But if we do that, our losses will also expand."

"……I am well aware."

"──Admiral!"

"We cannot afford to lose!" Kharkov said in a tone that allowed no room for argument. "If the opponent is one the Star Police cannot defeat, they can call us, the Space Force. But—what if there's someone we can't defeat? There will be no one left to call for help! Do you understand? We are the final bastion! There are times when we must choose means we know are reckless!"

"……Admiral……"

"──Request reinforcements from other Space Force units. However, do it without alerting the general soldiers; it would affect their morale."

Requesting reinforcements—did that mean he had judged that even this fleet of hundreds could not match the enemy before them—A chill ran down the adjutant's spine. What exactly were they dealing with? Suppressing a flicker of fear that had arisen in his heart, the adjutant wordlessly gave a salute of acknowledgment.

—The "Vorfeed" wandered through space. There were no longer any humans to give it strength, nor any humans to place expectations upon it. But even so, it didn't matter. It was because at that time, it did not yet know the meaning of "solitude." It had no way of knowing what had happened between its burial and its emergence. It merely wandered further through time, relying only on the mission it had been given—to defeat the "Dugradigdo."

—When exactly was it that it found the six spaceships standing amongst the stars?

The pitch-black battlefield turned into a gallery of flashing lights. A rain of light fired by the giant met the rushing units of the Space Force. Every time the rain shattered and turned into flowers of light, several lives vanished into nothingness. Still, the Space Force did not stop its advance.

That advance, which resembled a rampage, eventually succeeded in delivering the mobile units to the "Hecatoncheir." And now. An assault landing craft had scattered powered suit squads onto the "Hecatoncheir." It hadn't rushed into a hole opened by bombardment. It had literally scattered the squads onto the surface of the

"Hecatoncheir." It was a method closer to desperation than recklessness, but it worked. One of the powered suit members searched for the airlock's opening code—and finally, the Space Force succeeded in infiltrating the "Hecatoncheir."

"——There might be a grand welcome. After all, to them, we're the first guests."

"In that case, we'll have to give them plenty of grand presents too. All sorts."

The squad members joked as they opened the airlock leading to the corridor—

"——Whoa!?"

The member who opened the door cried out as something suddenly slumped onto him. They reflexively braced themselves and—froze. Those who had slumped onto him—were several humans. They were unarmed, and all of them were dead.

"……There's almost no air……!"

Noticing the display on the external sensors, one of them raised a voice of surprise. Looking at the people lying in piles with expressions of agony, he continued, "They probably…… sought space suits inside the airlock…… but the door was locked……"

"……But…… why would they do this!? They should be allies to them!?"

There was, of course, no one who could answer that question.

"……At any rate…… it's certain that someone is here and giving orders. Let's move forward."

At the captain's words, they pushed aside the dead and stepped into the corridor. It wasn't that they didn't feel for the dead, but they didn't have time to offer prayers. Even as they did this, the number of dead outside was increasing.

The corridor was completely closed off on both sides by bulkheads. They didn't know which way to go. On the other hand, they couldn't just go on a hunch. If they chose the wrong path, they would lose precious time.

"Split into two groups and look for an information terminal. Contact me if anything happens. We don't have time to open every bulkhead. Use the Psi-Blades to move forward."

At the captain's direction, the squad split into groups of five and began advancing in different directions. The one in the lead held his right hand toward the door.

Shago!

A metal cylinder extending from the sleeve area of the powered suit fit into the steel palm. In an instant, a blade of light emerged from the tip of the cylinder. Psi-Blade. Normally it was stored inside the sleeve and used as a simple energy gun.

—Before this was developed, breaking through bulkheads meant either painstakingly searching for and entering passwords or slowly burning through them with a laser torch—

The squad member moved his hand casually—with just that, the blade of light easily cut a square through the wall, showing them a new path. Beyond the opened path lay a stretching corridor, more bodies, and more bulkheads. They repeated the same process, moving deeper and deeper into the corridor.

They found several rooms, but they couldn't obtain enough information to do anything about the current situation. And when they cut through yet another bulkhead—there it was. A black machine about one meter in diameter with spider-like legs. The moment they recognized it.

Jyu-jyu-jyu!

The squad member who was cutting through the door was pierced by several maintenance beams.

"Is it a guard machine!?"

Immediately, the squad members deployed and entered combat stance. Retreating significantly to keep their distance, they aimed their weapon-integrated arms at the "Blacksmith" that crawled out from the door. The laser light that burst forth was deflected by the black surface of the machine.

"Toss fragmentation shells!"

Seeing that it had anti-laser armor, the captain's order flew. The powered suit squad readied their left arms and, from the backs of them, fired small shells at the approaching enemy!

Goun!

The shells, which exploded upon impact and shook the walls and the thin air, scattered metal fragments in the midst of the swarming machines. Black bodies were scattered across the corridor. The black main bodies of the "Blacksmiths" blown away by the blast pressure were not significantly damaged.

—However, the sensor eyes on the front were shattered, and the joints of the arms, whether from the explosion or the metal fragments, were shaking as if convulsing while emitting sparks. But the black machines, which knew no fear, came from further back, climbing over the remains of their comrades.

"Damn it!"

Gooooon!

A second grenade fired by someone destroyed several "Blacksmiths." But still, the next group of black machines pressed forward, climbing over the corpses of both friend and foe. —The difference in numbers was becoming insurmountable—

—The battle in the universe where everyone had vanished came to an end swiftly—and quite anticlimactically. The "Dugradigd0" did not know of the existence of the Eraser System. Knowing nothing, they fought the "Vorfeed," faithfully adhering to the basics of combat. Specifically, the concentration of force. And then, the "Vorfeed's" Eraser System activated.

—The spaceships, having lost all "power," fell toward a certain planet that was nearby. After a long, long time, that planet would eventually come to be called Lusolde.
—That was the story Canal told Kane and Milly.

There were several things that were outside of the calculations. One was the "Swordbreaker"—no, the "Vorfeed." At first, when the "Bodigar's" aiming chip was taken down, he had just thought it was a stroke of luck. But if it continued, that was a different story. Up to the third level of the aiming chips arranged in five stages had been destroyed. In terms of probability, it was certainly not zero.

However, there was nothing more foolish than dismissing an enemy who had slipped through a probability that should have been equal to zero and was closing in as merely "lucky." It was more realistic to think that the "Vorfeed" had detected the location of the "Bodigar's" aiming chips through some method unknown to the

"Dugradigdo."

They had detailed data on this side, but this side did not have detailed data on them. However—this side also had something that wasn't in their data. The sixth weapon of the Demon King, which had been obtained in this world.

He hadn't originally thought that a monotonous bombardment from the "Bodigar" could defeat the "Vorfeed." It was an attack intended with the thought that it would be fine if it could. The real battle was yet to come. Before that battle—what was bothersome was the Space Force. This was the other calculation error.

The Space Force had launched and deployed shipborne aircraft and landing craft far earlier than the standard theory. The "Hecatoncheir" did not have an infinite number of gun turrets. At this rate, it was impossible to shoot down every single one of the countless opponents approaching while taking evasive action.

In fact, although only a few, powered suit close-combat squads had already made their way inside the "Hecatoncheir." The "Blacksmiths" seemed to have taken care of them, but it wasn't pleasant for this state of affairs to continue.

Of course, using the power that brought equal destruction to all living things through the mark of the inverted pentagram and fear—"System Dark Star"—could annihilate the Space Force. But that system consumed a fair amount of "power" and was truly indiscriminate and wide-range. If it were used, the humans living on the planet Lusolde below would also be wiped out.

Currently, Planet Lusolde had become a very efficient "Fear" production factory—a source of power. It was not a good move to lose it before the battle with the "Vorfeed." In that case, against the Space Force—

"——I suppose I'll use this kind of method——"

Stargazer—though it was questionable whether he should still be called that—"he" muttered in the darkness.

For a moment, the "Hecatoncheir" glowed. In the next moment.

"——T-The shipborne aircraft units around the target……! They've been almost completely annihilated!"

A desperate report reached the bridge of the flagship "Sephiroth."

"――Wha―― What!?"

At that sudden and irrational report, Kharkov raised an astonished voice for what must have been the countless time.

"Was it that light just now!?"

"――P-Probably! What they're planning on doing is unknown, but……"

"――What will you do?"

The vice-commander standing beside him asked Kharkov. He knew. He was asking whether they would retreat or not.

The carrier units had taken significant damage from the recent attack. Engaging in close combat in this state was a fairly reckless idea. There had been no contact from the powered suit squads since the report that they had boarded the "Hecatoncheir." It was easy to imagine they had been defeated. Despite suffering this much damage, the fleet had yet to deal any significant damage to the "Hecatoncheir."

But—

"――We proceed――" Kharkov answered.

He knew it would be better to retreat for now and resume the advance after reinforcements arrived. But he ordered the advance. —We cannot abandon the people of Lusolde who are under fire— Of course, there was that too. But even more than that—

He felt strongly that they had to strike the enemy before them—the "Hecatoncheir"—right now.

"……I understand――" The vice-commander said quietly and nodded. Perhaps he shared the same feeling.

"――Then, we continue as we are――"

"A spaceship captured within radar range!" The navigator's voice rang out, cutting off the vice-commander's whisper.

"――Reinforcements!?" Kharkov asked, but the navigator shook his head slightly.

Thinking about it, it was only natural. It was far too early for reinforcements.

"——No——it's just one ship. Its ID code is erased, so its affiliation is unknown! It's heading straight…… what speed! What is this thing!? It's heading straight for the 'Hecatoncheir'!"

The "Hecatoncheir's" radar captured the image of a single spaceship approaching.

The "Swordbreaker's" radar captured a giant black shadow looming ahead.

And now. After a vast amount of time. They faced each other once again. To spread nightmares across the galaxy. To end the nightmare.

Vorfeed.

——Welcome——"Vorfeed"——

"——I've kept you waiting——"Dugradigdo"——"

The voice that echoed in their heads and Canal's voice overlapped. Simultaneously, light raced through space. Kane maneuvered the ship to dodge the light flying from afar.

"——I see! So that's how it is!" Canal cried out. "The firing point for that last shot was the 'Hecatoncheir'! Kane! The 'Bodigar' is connected to the 'Hecatoncheir' and is drawing energy from it! That's why its firing rate is so high!"

"And the countermeasure!?"

"Just do your best to dodge!"

"………………………………Hey……" Kane glanced at Canal. "Does that mean…… you don't really have a 'countermeasure'!?"

"What are you talking about! Milly's also 'doing her best' to shoot down those aiming chips! So 'doing your best to dodge' is a perfectly fine countermeasure, isn't it!"

"That's nothing but pure willpower!"

"Heh. After having probability ignored right in front of my eyes like this and Milly shooting down those chips one after another…… I'm starting to feel like I won't believe in science or calculations anymore."

"……You're the last person who should be saying that…… ――Whoa!"

As he spoke, Kane did his best to dodge the incoming fire. After dodging, he glanced at the radar and asked Canal, "Canal! What are these guys!? Their position is strange for an interceptor fleet!"

Countless ship shadows were reflected on the radar near the "Hecatoncheir."

"Oh. Don't worry about them. It's just the Space Force fighting the 'Hecatoncheir.'"

……………………

"――Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

At those casually spoken words, the voices of Kane and Milly harmonized perfectly.

"Wait just a minute! I haven't heard anything about this!"

"Well, I haven't told you."

"What on earth happened!?"

"I'm sure lots of things happened." Canal answered the two who were barking at her. She had noticed the engagement between the "Hecatoncheir" and the Space Force a while ago, but to be honest, not even Canal knew why things had turned out this way.

She had tried eavesdropping on the military communications, but naturally, no one was explaining the circumstances of the incident at this point. However—what was a bit concerning was that in those communications, they said long-range artillery didn't work against the "Hecatoncheir." It was certainly concerning, but she couldn't exactly ask for details, saying, "I'm the one who's been eavesdropping for a while now."

"……Furthermore—the 'Hecatoncheir' is also carrying out sporadic bombardment of Planet Lusolde. This is likely to produce 'Fear' to serve as its power—At any rate—striking 'them' as quickly as possible will certainly help the people of Lusolde and the Space Force."

"――True. Then we'll get over there and blow them away!" Kane shouted as he accelerated. Toward the airspace of the "Hecatoncheir" where the fires of war were clashing.

"……What is going on…… exactly……?" Rail muttered as he operated the terminal, a small wry smile appearing on his face. How many times had he said that since coming here? "……Really…… you never let me get bored……" Without resting his hands on the keyboard, Rail talked to himself.

Of course, he hadn't expected a peaceful and boring turn of events, but things were turning out stranger than he had anticipated. Earlier, when he had happened upon a swarm of black machines reminiscent of crabs or spiders, he had truly thought it was the end. But they had merely stared at Rail for a while before losing interest and vanishing into a narrow slit that appeared to be a maintenance port. (—Were they not guard robots after all—)

He realized that thought was a mistake after he proceeded further. There were corpses. Dead bodies contained within steel coffins called powered suits. They were of a type he had never seen before. They were likely a squad sent from inside the "Hecatoncheir" to capture Rail. Every one of them had their bodies pierced by something like energy guns, and their arms or the weapon parts on their shoulders had been burned away. Several remains of the black machines he had seen earlier were also scattered on the spot. They had likely been set to attack anything that was "armed."

And now. Having proceeded further, Rail had finally found this room and an information terminal. However—the map of the "Hecatoncheir's" interior he pulled from there still contained quite a few areas that were not marked. If it were a facility built using an asteroid, there would be parts left untouched as rock, but this "Hecatoncheir" was a completely artificial satellite. In other words, there must certainly be something in those parts.

"……So there's still more depth to it…… In that case, the question is where to enter from……" Of course, the map he had obtained did not kindly mark the entrances. Then he would need to get more detailed information from somewhere else. "Which means…… the main command room is around here……"

Once he had decided on a tentative goal, Rail copied the map data and resumed his advance.

Flowers of flame flashed in space. Having shot down several aiming chips, the "Swordbreaker" was closing in on the "Hecatoncheir."

"Psi-Blaster preparing to fire! Maximum output! Target, the Lost Ship 'Bodigar' connected to the 'Hecatoncheir'!"

"Roger!"

To Kane's voice, the voices of Canal and Milly harmonized perfectly.

"Psi-Blaster, energy charging! Estimating 'Bodigar' position from firing starting position! Five, four, three, two, one until target 'Hecatoncheir' is captured within range...... Captured! Confirming 'Bodigar's' current position! Sending the data!"

"Okay!"

Based on the data sent from Canal, Milly's fingers raced over the control panel.

"Psi-Blaster ready to fire!"

"Go! Milly!"

"Fire!"

Kou!

A single streak of white light approached the "Hecatoncheir" and—suddenly changed its trajectory midway, vanishing into the distant void.

"——Wha!?"

"What was that just now!?"

To the voices of Kane and Milly, Canal was silent for a moment before speaking.
"——It's likely——the use of aiming chips! They read that we would aim for the 'Bodigar' first and placed a group of aiming chips between us and the 'Bodigar,' refracting our shot!"

"I see! ——Then Milly, don't worry about the 'Bodigar'! Start chipping away from the edge of the 'Hecatoncheir'!"

"Okay!"

Responding immediately, Milly fired a second shot! This time, it approached the "Hecatoncheir" without bending midway—and in an instant, part of the "Hecatoncheir" reflected on the monitor appeared to waver.

Simultaneously, the Psi-Blaster's shot changed its trajectory as if it had been deflected, flying off into the distance of the darkness.

"Tch! They've got aiming chips in a place like that too!"

"——No——"

Kane's voice seemed to tremble slightly as he spoke to Canal, or was it just Kane's imagination?

"……That was…… just now…… it wasn't refraction by an aiming chip! That refraction pattern was…… just like…… the space lens of the 'Gorun Nova'——!"

"——'Gorun Nova'!?"

"What is the meaning of this!? We sank that thing ages ago!"

Kane howled while maneuvering to dodge the bombardment from the Hecatoncheir. Canal responded, her tone bitter.

"There is only one possibility! The Galveira was once stationed aboard the Hecatoncheir! In other words—they manufactured it! They made a duplicate of its space-warping chip!"

An auxiliary weapon that distorted space, acting as a lens to twist the trajectory of enemy attacks and manipulate one's own fire at will—depending on its use, it was a tool that bordered on invincibility.

"—Wait a second! That means...!"

"Precisely!"

"What does 'precisely' mean!?" Millie interjected from the side, unable to follow what the two were implying.

"To put it simply..." Canal began to explain, but she suddenly furrowed her brows.
"...Wait! The Space Force fleet has begun re-accelerating! They are closing in rapidly on the Hecatoncheir! It appears they intend to engage in close-quarters ship-to-ship combat!"

"That’s reckless!"

"What are they thinking!?" Kane and Millie shouted simultaneously.

The Space Force had likely observed the Hecatoncheir's attention shift toward the newly arrived Sword-Breaker and decided to seize the opportunity. Even so, attempting close-quarters combat against a fortress with standard starships looked, frankly, like an act of pure desperation.

But—

"—They’ve realized it too—" Canal said. "Perhaps by human instinct. They know... that thing is an existence that must not be allowed to remain in this universe."

"—They’ve certainly—made a bold move—"

Standing in the darkness, Stargazer muttered in a quiet tone.
He was referring to the Space Force. The fleet was currently approaching the Hecatoncheir at maximum acceleration. They were likely planning for a close-range melee. It was a reckless tactic that ignored all standard theory—but in truth, it was an effective one.

If the Space Force were the only opponents, it would be a trivial matter, but the true enemy was the Vorfeed looming before them. The Space Force was merely a side-show to be dealt with—and if the target were small mobile weapons, the same trick as before would suffice.

Specifically, by using the space lenses, the energy rounds fired simultaneously from various gun ports could be split into countless streaks of light.

While the power of each individual shot would decrease, the volume of fire and the probability of a hit would skyrocket. It was the ideal method for crushing mobile weapons equipped with only thin armor. However, if the opponent were starships, the story changed. Attacks with reduced power could not inflict fatal wounds, rendering the tactic meaningless.

By the time the fleet reached this position, standard bombardment could sink a significant number of ships—but even so, numbers were numbers. Some would surely make it through. That would be, at the very least, annoying.

There was a simple solution. He just had to retreat.

The Vorfeed had likely already noticed the moment the space lenses were manipulated. If that were the case, showing them more now was not an issue.

"—Let’s go—" Stargazer whispered softly.

* * *

The Hecatoncheir's bombardment against the Space Force fleet continued intermittently. One by one, the allied ships were hit and fell out of formation.

"—Just a little longer! We’re almost there! Once we are—!" Karkov’s voice echoed across the bridge.

But then—

"The Hecatoncheir has—begun... begun moving!"

It was at that moment the anomalous report arrived.

* * *

"—It’s... it's moving!?"

Inside the cockpit of the Sword-Breaker, Millie let out a cry of disbelief.

"It has begun moving in a direction away from the Space Force fleet. Its speed is roughly equivalent to the cruising speed of a Space Force battleship. It isn't particularly fast, but this will significantly increase the time it takes for the fleet to close the distance to the Hecatoncheir."

In contrast to the shocked Millie, Canal continued her report with a sense of detachment.

"...Not... not particularly fast... you say!? That’s for a normal spaceship! This thing is 20 kilometers long! The scale is entirely different! For something that big to move at that speed...! It’s not sane!"

"—Did you forget, Millie? About that Ragedo Mezegis thing we fought before?" Kane interjected from the side.

A mobile destroyer that possessed extraordinary maneuverability by killing most of its own inertia with inertia-neutralizing chips placed around the hull. They had only managed to defeat it by dragging the fight into the atmosphere.

"...Now that you mention it... that thing was also on the Hecatoncheir... which means!"

Canal nodded at Millie’s words.

"There is no mistake: the Hecatoncheir possesses both the space lens capability of the Galveira and the inertia neutralization of the Lagdo Mezegis. With those, it can achieve this speed without needing a massive propulsion system. Currently, a large number of objects roughly 50 meters in length—resembling small spaceships—are deployed around the Hecatoncheir. Those are likely the chips possessing these composite abilities."

"Wait... just wait a minute... then that Hecatoncheir is..."

Millie whispered in horror, and Canal nodded once more.

"Yes—it is, so to speak, a Lost Ship built in this world. The sixth weapon to protect the Dark Lord—the giant battleship Hecatoncheir."

* * *

"—What are your orders—Admiral—"

The voice of the executive officer was thick with fear. It was only natural. An object 20 kilometers long had begun moving at the speed of a battleship. They had known from the start this was no ordinary opponent, but they had never imagined something so far beyond reason.

This isn't an enemy we can beat—even if reinforcements arrive—

That thought reared its head. However—Karkov replied without a moment's hesitation. He said only one word.

"—Advance—"

* * *

"—With this—my trump card has vanished—" Canal spoke with a bitter tone. "The method used to seal them in the past—the way of neutralizing their energies against each other. I do not know what the Hecatoncheir's energy source is, but if it is different from theirs... then even if we reduce the energy of the Dugradigdo and the Bodigar to zero, we cannot erase the energy of the Hecatoncheir they are connected to. Their energy would be replenished immediately—and we would be the ones to lose strength first."

"...Then what if the Hecatoncheir's energy is the same as theirs?"

"...We would be unable to fully neutralize such a vast amount of energy, and we would still be the ones to lose strength first," Canal replied to Millie’s question.

"In other words—we've got no choice but a direct head-on fight!?" Kane asked, his hands never leaving the controls.

"Precisely. And we must do so while maintaining our reserves. Even if we defeat the Hecatoncheir, if the Dugradigdo escapes, it's all over. We must defeat the Hecatoncheir where it lurks, and then defeat the one that emerges—only then can we use the word... victory."

"Interesting! Let’s give it a shot then! Prepare to fire the Leap Railgun! First, we’ll knock down those chips around it one by one! Millie, can you do it!?"

"Of course!" Millie shouted back in response to Kane.

By scattering small teleportation devices at the target or point of impact, the Leap Railgun could teleport a portion of the target along with the surrounding space—essentially gouging the opponent out of reality. It would be able to destroy the Hecatoncheir's chips without being affected by the space lenses.

However—

"Wait! I hate to dampen the mood, but the Leap Railgun currently has 100 rounds remaining. Conversely, there are 200 composite chips protecting the Hecatoncheir. Even if every shot hits, half will remain."

Kane fell silent for a moment at Canal’s point.

"—Understood! Then there’s only one move! The same tactic as the Space Force! We wedge ourselves between the chips and the main body and engage in close combat!"

"That’s reckless!"

"I know!"

"Millie! Just before we charge in, use the Leap Railgun to knock out the nearby chips as fast as you can! If they use those space lenses in some weird way while we’re closing in, our hull might get ripped apart!"

"Roger that!" Millie agreed easily to Kane’s reckless plan.

"—Wait...!"

"—Do you remember, Canal?" Millie cut off Canal’s rising protest, speaking in a quiet tone. "What Kane said before. 'In a fight, the one who is most reckless wins.' We have to win this battle, don't we? Then—a little recklessness can't be helped!"

"...You’ve... started to sound like Kane... Millie..."

"What do you mean 'started to sound like him'!? How rude!"

"What do you mean 'how rude'!? That's rude to me!"

Canal gave a wry smile at their words and turned her eyes to the Hecatoncheir displayed on the screen.

"—Understood. I'll join in on that recklessness! How about this? We destroy a portion of the chips, close in on the Hecatoncheir, move along the outer hull, and take down the Bodigar first! That explosion should surely inflict significant damage on the Hecatoncheir as well!"

"Alright, I'm in! Canal! Simulate the course! Send the data over here!"

"Roger!"

Shortly after she responded, the approach route to the Hecatoncheir was displayed on Kane's screen.

"To be honest, as long as they are using space lenses and targeting chips, there is no such thing as a 'relatively safe' route! I have chosen the course that allows us to reach the Bodigar in the shortest time!"

"Perfect!"

Next, a partial diagram of the Hecatoncheir and the Sword-Breaker's infiltration route appeared on Millie's screen. Several red and yellow dots were displayed. The two-colored dots were moving slowly but surely.

"The effective output range of the enemy chips is unknown—but at the very least, before we charge in, you must definitely crush the chips marked in red. If you can take out the yellow ones as well, our safety and success rate will jump significantly."

"...There are quite a lot of them..."

"Is it impossible?"

"What are you saying, Canal?" Millie gave a wink. "When I get serious, probability calculations mean nothing! You saw me knocking down chips earlier, didn't you? Dropping things like this is a piece of cake!"

"I'm counting on that spirit! —Entering the charge course!"

"Alright, let's go!" Kane roared.

The Sword-Breaker plunged into the descending rain of fire.

"All ships, fire missiles! Set the detonation point just in front of the Hecatoncheir! Even if the missiles themselves don't work, they should be effective enough to blind the enemy's sensors and drop their firing accuracy!"

Karkov's orders flew to all ships. Countless missiles headed toward the massive bulk of the Hecatoncheir. Innumerable flashes of light erupted.

"All ships, full speed! I don't care if the engines burn out! Push through!"

—I've completely failed as an Admiral— Karkov thought in the corner of his mind even as he raised his voice. He suddenly remembered his younger days, when he was constantly clashing with space pirates on the front lines. Now he held the grand title of Admiral, but perhaps he was more a warrior than a commander. He caught himself thinking such things.

"—Are... are you sure about this!? Admiral!?" The executive officer standing nearby raised his voice, his posture shrinking in contrast to Karkov.

"—Don't you see? The Hecatoncheir moved. It moved away from us. That is the same as declaring, 'I'm in trouble if your fleet gets inside my reach.'"

"...That... that might be true, but..."

"If you are afraid, I don't mind. You may abandon ship. I will not hold it against you."

"I can't do that... I mean, in this situation, going outside in an escape pod with a pathetic engine is way more dangerous!"

"I see. That’s true. Then give up and come along."

"Admiiiiiral...!"

* * *

—To be honest—he was a little perplexed.

What was it? This movement of the Space Force? He had shown them long-range bombardment far exceeding their reach, sinking many ships. He had shown them the swarm of approaching mobile weapons being wiped out by fire utilizing space lenses. And he had mocked their desperate approach by moving away. After all this, they should have despaired. It was only natural to give up and flee.

And yet, why did they keep coming?

They used missiles that wouldn't even work as expensive jamming waves, making a pathetic effort to lower his firing accuracy even slightly, yet they were slowly but surely closing in on the Hecatoncheir. The Dugradigdo could not understand it.

"—They might have realized—" Stargazer said. He spoke toward the darkness swirling in the room. "That what is here... is the natural enemy of all living things. —Should we... should we use it? The System Dark Star? If we do, I will be the only one remaining."

The darkness was silent for a moment at Stargazer’s question—

—No... we cannot afford to waste energy needlessly... the living can be dealt with however we wish... but the Vorfeed... may still have parts unknown to us... if we use it, it will be after the Vorfeed has been silenced—

A bitter groan filled the space.

"..........."

He wouldn't be surprised by anything anymore. How many times had he sworn that to himself, and how many times had he broken it? Rail stood there dazed, the thought suddenly crossing his mind.

It had been the same at the main command room he had just visited. He had known something was happening, but he hadn't expected the Hecatoncheir to be in a full-scale war with the Space Force fleet. He didn't know the full details of what had happened since he arrived, but he at least knew that the Space Force and the Hecatoncheir were in a state of combat. And he knew that even the main command room lacked information on the parts that were black boxes on the map.

With no route to the unknown areas and the Space Force engaged in combat, there was no longer any reason for Rail to stay on the Hecatoncheir. Originally, he had come here to create a pretext for an investigation. In the current situation where this place was in a head-on collision with the Space Force, it was no longer at the stage of "evidence of a crime" or whatever. It was wise to escape quickly.

Rail moved down the corridor toward the nearest escape pod—and at the end of his journey—this very spot—he stood frozen in disbelief.

There should have been several escape pods lined up, but all that remained were dismantled wrecks. Those black machines—the Blacksmiths—were clinging to the pods that still held their shape, steadily proceeding with the demolition work. It was likely a measure taken by whatever was controlling the Hecatoncheir to completely block the crew's escape.

"...What do I do... hey..." Even when he asked himself, no answer came back.

Eliminating the Blacksmiths with this unarmed powered suit and repairing an escape pod was, of course, out of the question. The idea of going directly into space with the powered suit crossed his mind for a moment. This would allow him to operate in space to some extent.

—But out there was the middle of a battle. If he went out there in a powered suit, he would likely be seen as an enemy and shot down without question. He didn't intend to be that reckless. Changing into a normal space suit was also far too unreliable. At this rate, he could guess that the other escape pods were in a similar state.

—He could guess, but—

"...I have no choice... but to go and see..."

It was certain that staying here and watching the demolition work wouldn't help. Mutteirng weakly, Rail began to head back the way he had come.

The white hull raced through space toward the black darkness looming ahead. Dodging the rain of countless glittering shots—

"Cease fire! Psy-Barrier, full power deployment!"

Kane’s voice rang out just as Millie’s finger was about to hit the Leap Railgun’s firing switch. No one asked why. Millie pulled her hand away from the weapons control panel as if it had been burned, and Canal immediately deployed the Psy-Barrier.

In that instant.

GOOOOOM!

The universe shined with the impact. Everything reflected on the display turned into a white light, returning to the original image a moment later.

"Barrier release! What was that!?"

"Bombardment from all directions!" Canal said in response to Kane’s question.

"All directions!?"

"The Hecatoncheir's gun ports fired simultaneously—and all of those shots came from 360 degrees, from every direction!"

"That's impossible! Even with space lenses, you can't pull off a trick like that!"

Certainly, if space lenses were used, it would be possible to converge all of the Hecatoncheir's fire onto a single point. However, as long as the space lenses existed in a way that clung to the Hecatoncheir's surroundings, that fire should only come from the direction of the Hecatoncheir.

"It is impossible! If only space lenses were used!"

"—Targeting chips!?" Kane shouted.

"Yes. The bombardment, with its trajectory controlled to some extent by the space lenses, was further refracted by the targeting chips scattered in the surrounding airspace. It was turned into a multi-directional bombardment!"

"You've got to be joking!" As she spoke, Millie’s hands slid over the control panel. The two Leap Railgun rounds she fired surely banished two of the composite chips into the void.

—But, honestly, it felt like a drop in the bucket.

"Does that Bodigar have that many targeting chips!?"

"According to the data, it should be ten sets of five... fifty units—but they must have mass-produced the same thing on the Hecatoncheir!"

—Come to think of it, this was a situation that should have been expected. The targeting chips had already been placed in the direction the Sword-Breaker had approached from. Of course, it wasn't as if they had been placed randomly and the Sword-Breaker had happened to approach from that direction. Chips had been deployed in a wide, fixed area around the Hecatoncheir from the start. That was also what had enabled the ultra-long-range bombardment of the Space Force fleet.

"Here comes the second shot! Barrier!" Following Kane’s voice, the barrier enveloped the Sword-Breaker—

GUGYOOOOOM!

They somehow managed to block the second bombardment.

"If that’s how it’s gonna be—" The Sword-Breaker released its barrier once the light faded and accelerated. "We've got no choice but to jump right into their reach and crush 'em! Millie! Leap Railgun..."

Before he could finish his sentence.

Gakunn! A small vibration hit the ship.

"What was that!?"

"A tractor beam!" Canal shouted.

It was something that reacted with the materials used for the spaceship's exterior, exerting a pulling and restraining capability, though it had no offensive power. The Hecatoncheir was originally intended as a prototype experimental factory. Naturally, it had cargo bays and tractor beams to guide transport ships. They must have radiated it into the area, having increased its output and range, reading the timing of the Sword-Breaker releasing its barrier.

Because it was being radiated over a wide area, it was impossible for it to exert enough restraining force to overcome a spaceship's engine output—but—it was enough to kill their maneuverability to some extent. This would drop the Sword-Breaker's mobility and allow them to finish it off with bombardment—Kane instantly read that plan and issued orders without hesitation.

"Canal! Forced exterior ejection!"

"Roger!"

* * *

—In an instant—the Sword-Breaker's white hull seemed to burst and scatter—

From the outside, it likely looked that way. But it was different. They had placed further armor over the original exterior, changing its appearance and form—they had used explosive bolts to forcibly eject that camouflage hull. And it returned to its original form.

—An organic form, covered in black armor, somehow reminiscent of a living creature. 195 meters in length. The battle-sealed ship Vorfeed.

The hull, blacker than darkness, raced through the void. Faster than before.

—My body... is so light— Canal felt a pleasant sense of liberation.

The area was still within the tractor beam's range, but since the material of the hull itself was now different, it no longer had any meaning. And the hull, lightened by the removal of the camouflage exterior, reacted and accelerated more clearly than ever before.

"Let’s go! Millie! Canal!"

"Roger!"

Millie’s fingers operated the gun ports, and Canal’s chest throbbed with heat.

—At last—you show your true form! Vorfeed!— A voice reached them. A voice from the darkness. Inside the heads of everyone present.

"—To be honest—I don't really like this form much!" Canal said. "But right now—this is no time to be picky about appearances! Dugradigdo! This is their world! Their dreams are theirs to spin! There is no place for a nightmare left behind by a world already lost! The nightmare ends here!"

—A nightmare for humans is eternal peace for me! If there is no place for it, I will simply create one myself!—

"Shut up!" Kane cut in from the side. Into the conversation of those left behind. "If you want to see a nightmare, go see it by yourself! Don't go pushing something so boring on other people! I'm gonna knock you flat right now, so if you wanna dream, do it after that!"

"I agree with Kane!" As she spoke, Millie’s hands slid over the panel.

"—Oooooooooh!?"

In the darkness, was it Stargazer or the darkness itself that cried out? The responses of some of the composite chips placed around the Hecatoncheir were vanishing at an incredible pace. Of course, it was due to the Vorfeed's fire. But the shooting accuracy exceeded the Dugradigdo's expectations.

One look at where the chips were being shot down made it clear what the Vorfeed intended to do next. It was going to wedge itself between the Hecatoncheir's hull and the composite chips. To erase the interference from the chips.

And likely, the first target was—

"—I see it! Bodagar!"

Kane roared at the image displayed on the screen. That massive bulk, like a skyscraper, rising from the Hecatoncheir. The ultra-long-range bombardment ship Bodagar. Its base was buried deep within the Hecatoncheir, like a giant tree that had taken root.

While there was still fire from the gun ports clinging to the Hecatoncheir, there was no longer the multi-directional fire using space lenses like before. Naturally, if they did such a thing, the Vorfeed would simply dodge, and the fire would damage the Hecatoncheir itself. Now that they had taken this position, the primary objective was, of course, as originally planned—

"First, we crush the small fry! Psy-Blaster simultaneous fire!"

"Roger!"

—I have no reason—to be called small fry by a mere human!— The Bodagar's "voice" echoed in their heads.

"Try and dodge it if you're so upset!" Millie shouted.

The dozen or so spears of light fired from the Vorfeed headed straight for the massive body—and in a split second.

The connection with the Hecatoncheir was released, and as if it had been launched, the Bodigar's massive body danced in the void! Five composite chips surrounded it. Using the chips to kill its own inertia, it had made a high-speed departure from the Hecatoncheir like a fired bullet, dodging the fire.

"Whoa!? It really dodged!?"

"Daaaah! Millie! It’s because you said something unnecessary!"

"Is it my fault!?"

"Just blame it on yourself for now!"

(—Did you look down on me, thinking long-range fire was my only feature!?—)

Countless secondary guns clinging to the Bodigar's hull flashed with light. The generated space lenses changed their trajectory—and even at the cost of involving the

Hecatoncheir, they fell like rain upon the Vorfeed!

GUGAAAN!

An explosion. Vibration.

"Starboard wing hit! Impact on combat is minor!" Canal’s damage report followed. But Kane did not flinch.

"Don't get cocky with borrowed power—you third-rate!" Without slowing down, he plunged straight toward the Bodigar!

"Millie!"

"Roger!"

A barrage of Leap Railgun fire wiped out the composite chips floating nearby—and those clinging to the Bodigar.

—Do you think you can win just by charging!?— Along with words of mockery, the Bodigar deployed a barrier.

However, the Vorfeed changed its trajectory just before the collision, grazed the barrier, and passed into the void.

"Did you think humans were that stupid!?" Kane roared, rotating the hull 180 degrees and firing the engines at full power.

Gidi!

Even the inertia neutralization system of the Lost Ship screamed at the reckless maneuver, making the structural materials creak. After a brief pause, it reversed and accelerated toward the Bodigar!

—No way—!? Are you insane!?—

"I don't know!"

The Bodigar released its barrier and tried to move into an evasive maneuver in a panic, but compared to the current Vorfeed, the movement of its massive body, having lost its composite chips, was far too slow.

(—Dammit!—) Realizing evasion was impossible, the Bodigar redeployed its barrier.

Millie’s

fire shattered the Hecatoncheir's composite chips that were beginning to gather again—

"Psy-Barrier deployment!"

DOGAA!

The Vorfeed crashed into the Bodigar, which still had its barrier deployed! While losing some momentum, the two ships plunged straight into the Hecatoncheir!

GUGYAAAAAA!

Violent vibration and the sound of crushing. The collision of such giant masses shattered and dented the Hecatoncheir's exterior, which was covered in the same material as a Lost Ship.

"Barrier release! Reverse fire, simultaneous staggered fire with Leap Railgun and Psy-Blaster upon departure!"

The Bodigar, which had been wedged into the Hecatoncheir's hull with its barrier active, temporarily released the barrier and attempted to turn around. That was when the fire from the Vorfeed came. The Bodigar redeployed its barrier in a panic. But the Leap Railgun attack came first. Parts of the barrier and the hull’s surface were gouged out along with the space itself.

And a split second later—threading through the gaps in the barrier, the brilliance of the Psy-Blaster pierced the massive body!

—YUOOOOOOOHHHHHH!—

A scream like that of a beast, a silent death cry, echoed in space and in their heads—

GUGYOOOOOOM!

The Bodigar's massive body turned into a white light!

"Barrier deployment!"

The explosive shockwave from point-blank range shook the Vorfeed's hull violently. Once the light faded, a black hole lay open on the surface of the Hecatoncheir. A crater caused by the explosion. And deeper within that crater, a black vertical shaft leading deep into the Hecatoncheir's interior stood open.

"—What is that—?"

"That is likely the Bodigar's launch port," Canal answered Kane’s whisper.

"Then—is it in there!? The Dugradigdo too!?" Kane said, a look of determination hidden in the depths of his eyes.

"...Wait, Kane, you're thinking of charging in there, aren't you...?"

"You bet! It’s been the standard since ancient times: to take down a big guy, you do it from the inside!"

"I'm sorry to dampen your spirits, but there is no sign of it in there. It's likely a different launch port. If it intended to defeat us even at the cost of self-destructing the Hecatoncheir—you know what would happen."

"...Urgh...!" Kane groaned at Canal’s words.

If they carelessly plunged inside, there was a high possibility that the Dugradigdo would escape from elsewhere and self-destruct the Hecatoncheir. Even with the Psy-Barrier, whether it could withstand the self-destruction of a mass 20 kilometers long was a question—and if it couldn't, the escaped Dugradigdo would not hesitate to activate the System Dark Star against the Space Force fleet.

In current human science and technology, in order to exceed the speed of light, the presence of crew members was indispensable to physically apply their mental power. In other words, unmanned ships basically did not exist in the Space Force. That would make the Dugradigdo invincible in this galaxy. The slaughter would be repeated.

"—Fine! Then for now, we fire! Blast 'em with the Psy-Blaster!"

"Roger!"

Millie responded to Kane’s words, and the light of the Psy-Blaster raced into the abyss of darkness! But before the light could reach the darkness, several doors closed off the deep shaft.

Go!

The Psy-Blaster fire likely pierced through several of the shutters easily. But it never reached the core. If Kane had plunged into the shaft just now, the doors would have been closed, leaving him unable to move.

"—Tsk! So as long as we don't know where the Dugradigdo is, we can't do anything reckless!? You're telling us to just keep poking the Hecatoncheir!?"

"Let's just do it!" Millie’s roar was followed by a shot that directly hit a composite chip that was approaching.

* * *

DOON!

Vibration shook the corridor violently.

"...Wh... what was that...?"

Rail leaned against the wall, muttering, and then he realized. It didn't matter "what." It was obvious. It was the Space Force’s attack. For a while now, vibrations, both far and near, had been hitting the Hecatoncheir. But that one was particularly large and close.

"...I hope things aren't getting too bad..." As he spoke, he opened what must have been the umpteenth bulkhead—

"...........they are..........."

He stopped and said sullenly. The corridor ahead was gone. It was crushed and mangled, revealing a view of space.

"................."

He stood in silence for a while, but then he headed toward the torn corridor to at least take a look at the state of space. He approached and looked out from the torn section—

".............."

Rail was at a loss for words. He had thought that had been the Space Force’s fire or something. But what lay before his eyes was a giant crater. There must have been a fairly large explosion there. The ground of the Hecatoncheir was gouged out, revealing a black vertical shaft at its bottom.

And before Rail’s eyes, several streaks of light poured down toward the shaft! They were fired from a black spaceship above.

—Oh crap!

He reflexively braced himself, but the fire vanished into the depths of the shaft as if it had been sucked in—and nothing happened after that. The black spaceship that had fired stayed for a moment and then moved away while dodging the fire from the Hecatoncheir.

—It didn't look like a military ship... well, whatever. More importantly, what do I do now— Rail turned his gaze back to the crater. If he remembered correctly from the map he had pulled up earlier, this area was—part of the area not listed on the map—the so-called black box.

—What do I do— Rail asked himself. From here, it would be possible to jump out into space once and enter that area from the breach caused by the explosion. Perhaps there would be a clue for escape there. Of course, even greater danger might await. On the other hand, continuing to search for escape pod locations was a futile endeavor. After all, it was unclear if there were even any intact escape pods on this Hecatoncheir.

...I’m not... good at gambling...

Muttering in his heart, Rail stepped forward.

* * *

White light flashed on the surface of the Hecatoncheir. The Vorfeed's fire destroyed several more gun ports and one of the composite chips. But no matter how many rounds they fired or how many gun ports they crushed, the volume of fire from the Hecatoncheir didn't feel like it had decreased at all.

Of course, that was just a feeling. The more gun ports they crushed, the more the volume of fire surely decreased. —But—more than the volume of fire had decreased, the Vorfeed's range of action had also diminished. After sinking the Bodigar, the Vorfeed had once again entered between the Hecatoncheir's surface and the composite chips, continuing its indiscriminate fire.

The remaining ammunition for the Leap Railgun was down to a few rounds, and almost the same number of composite chips should have vanished from around the Hecatoncheir. But the Hecatoncheir's movement speed had not changed at all, and the space lenses were still active. Naturally, the Vorfeed's possible range of movement was limited to the narrow space between the Hecatoncheir's surface and where the chips were placed, making evasion difficult.

Fire concentrated there. The Hecatoncheir's fire, which showed no fear even of scraping its own surface. It seemed that after losing the Bodigar, it had abandoned the idea of not damaging the Hecatoncheir itself.

"Psy-Barrier!"

Unable to avoid the crossfire, Kane ordered the barrier’s deployment. The deployed barrier somehow managed to block all of the fire—and in an instant, the space overhead wavered.

—This is bad!

That was the cry raised by Kane’s instinct.

"Barrier release! Full speed evasion!"

Canal reacted instantly. The Vorfeed's hull moved sideways as if sliding—

GOGAA!

Explosions and vibrations shook the cockpit.

"Port side hit! Turning capability decreased by 5%! Psy-Blaster gun port number four is unusable!"

Canal’s voice overlapped with the blinking of several red lamps.

"They used the space lenses to leave the top of our barrier wide open! It’s the same principle as the Leap Railgun!"

"Damn you! So you're telling us to just keep dodging without using the barrier!?" Kane cursed. If they deployed the barrier fully, their speed would naturally slow down. If they were targeted with fire from above, complete evasion would be impossible.

"What about going up once!?"

"There aren't many Leap Railgun rounds left!" Canal said to Millie’s suggestion.

Just as it had been at the time of infiltration, it was necessary to destroy the composite chips at the time of departure. They would use the Leap Railgun then, but—

"Departure should be possible, but whether re-entry is possible is... if it’s impossible, we won't be able to go on the offensive until we've produced a certain amount of Leap Railgun ammunition!"

"Then in the end—we've got no choice but to reduce the opponent's ammunition!"

As they spoke, Millie’s fire silenced several of the Hecatoncheir's gun ports—

GOGO!

The fire grazed the Vorfeed's hull.

"Hit on the port side! Damage is minor! No hindrance to combat!" Canal shouted.

"—Tsk! At this rate, we're just gonna get worn down!?" Kane cursed. The Vorfeed was also inflicting its share of damage on the Hecatoncheir. But it was unknown how much damage that was for the Hecatoncheir's massive body. The Space Force fleet was also continuing its attack, but it had little effect. And more importantly—the Dugradigdo, sitting unmoved inside the Hecatoncheir, had yet to receive a single scratch.

Kicking a wall that had turned into rubble, Rail leaped into space. After a short space walk, he reached a crack in the wall. Beyond that should be the black box area. There were wrecks of various things floating around, perhaps from the earlier explosion. Among them were the wrecks of the Blacksmiths, the black machines he had encountered in the corridor.

Beyond the breach was a giant vertical shaft leading deep into the Hecatoncheir. The depths of the shaft were a dark abyss. In a corner of that darkness, he saw a flickering light.

—What is that?

He switched the powered suit’s monitor to night-vision mode and zoomed in on the light. It had likely been hit by the black spaceship’s fire earlier. There was a large wound on the wall of the shaft. And clinging to that wound were countless Blacksmiths. Using the beam torches on their arms, they were steadily proceeding with repairs on the damaged area. It was those innumerable flashing lights he had seen.

"...If those are guard machines, they also act as automatic repair systems... —wait, hold on...!"

An idea flashed in Rail’s head. If those were the Hecatoncheir's automatic repair systems, they should also have the data for the areas that were black boxes on the maps he had obtained so far. After all, what they were repairing now was that very black-boxed area. And among the wreckage floating around earlier, there had been Blacksmiths. Which meant—

He poked his head out of the crack again and looked around. The target was found relatively nearby. Its front sensor eye was shattered and most of its legs were torn off, but the black body was nearly intact.

"Will this—work?" He pulled out the broken legs with all his might. It was possible only because of the powered suit’s strength. Deep inside, where various unknown devices and cables were packed, he finally found what looked like a memory chip and connected it to the information terminal on his arm. He searched for information for a while—

"—Jackpot!"

The map of the Hecatoncheir he obtained clearly showed everything down to the central core. For now, he copied that data and performed a more detailed search. What he wanted to know, above all, was a safe way to escape. Even if he stepped into the black-boxed area, it would be meaningless if there was no clue for escape there. He searched for anything like an escape device—

"...Hmm...?" While he was checking the data. Rail suddenly noticed that a small red lamp on the Blacksmith's memory chip was blinking incessantly.

"................."

A bad feeling ran down his spine. He temporarily interrupted the data check and peeked into the depths of the shaft from the crack—and the repair light that had been visible earlier was gone.

"...Oh boy..." He switched the monitor to night-vision telescopic mode—and he saw a swarm of Blacksmiths pushing toward him. It seemed the fact that he had pulled data had been communicated to their companions.

"—Wait just a minute!" He hurriedly threw away the Blacksmith wreckage in his hand. But it was already too late. The red eyes of the approaching swarm were looking straight at Rail. Surely, he wouldn't be overlooked this time. If he stayed here, what awaited him would be an unpleasant fate. There was only one escape route left.

Rail opened the powered suit’s communication line.

"This is Interstellar Police Rail Flamer! Current position is the outer perimeter of the Hecatoncheir! Requesting immediate rescue! Repeating! Requesting immediate rescue!"

GON!

Kane honestly didn't remember how many times that vibration had hit the hull.

"Starboard upper hit! Anti-air needle beam number two is unusable!"

"Don't worry about it! Anti-air guns are just for show!" He blurted out to Canal’s damage report, sounding desperate. It would be a lie to say he wasn't concerned about the number of red lamps lit in the cockpit, but it was also a fact that worrying wouldn't change anything.

"Kane!"

"Is it bad news!? Or the worst news!?" Without entertaining Kane’s joke, Canal continued. "I’ve picked up a distress signal! It seems someone has escaped from the Hecatoncheir!"

"I’m sorry, but we've got our hands full here! Tell them to wait two days if they want help!"

"The sender is identifying as Rail Flamer of the Interstellar Police!"

"......................"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaat!?" Kane blurted out. It didn't show on her face or in her voice, but honestly, Canal felt the same way.

"Rail... is that... the person we met during the pirate incident?" Millie asked from the side without slowing down her bombardment.

"Probably... but what’s the meaning of this!?

—I mean, in these cases, the ones in a pinch and asking for help are usually a lovely beauty or an innocent child! Why do we have to help a cop who’s seen too much of the world!?"

"Then shall we abandon him?"

"..............................."

"...I guess we... can't really do that..." Saying so with a look of deep dissatisfaction, Kane changed the ship’s course.

"—Kane! Why are you guys— ...I mean, what on earth is this ship—!? ...I mean, it doesn't look like I should be asking! This!"

"Don't ask if you know! Because we helped someone like you, we took two or three more hits!" Kane said in a completely disgruntled tone.

—But the rescue of Rail was not that difficult. The location was where they had just destroyed the Bodigar. Just by hovering there for a bit, Rail had clung to the hull on his own. He entered the cockpit without even taking the time to remove his powered suit—and there, Rail was reunited with familiar faces.

He had a mountain of things he wanted to ask. But one look at the volume of fire flying across the display and the number of red lamps lit in this room told him this was no time for leisurely conversation. He sat down quietly in a spare seat—

GOOOM!

A large impact hit.

"Starboard hit!"

"Damage report!?" To Kane’s question, Canal replied without a moment's delay.

"It’s better not to ask!"

"Then I won't ask!"

—Oh boy, oh boy! Watching from behind, Rail felt a sense of panic. Kane likely noticed that three or four more red lamps had been added to the room at the same time as that impact. No one said it, but even Rail, who had just entered, could tell the ship had taken significant damage. At this rate, he didn't feel safe at all, even though he had been rescued.

"...Hey... shouldn't we retreat for a bit..."

"Impossible!" Kane cut him off and stated firmly.

"...Impossible... you say..."

"This is an opponent that must be defeated right now," Canal said without looking back.

"...This... you mean the Hecatoncheir?"

"To be precise, something inside it!"

"And if you can't defeat it?" When Rail tried asking, she answered clearly and without hesitation.

"—Humanity will likely be destroyed—"

Rail was momentarily speechless.

"...I’d like to ask... but by any chance... was that where I was supposed to laugh...?"

"It’s a normal reaction to say 'I can't believe it'!" Millie said while her hands never stopped firing.

—They’re serious... these guys...

Completely unsure of how to react, Rail fell silent again. He couldn't believe the talk of humanity being destroyed, but at the very least, it was a fact that Kane and the others weren't likely to choose the path of fleeing without defeating the Hecatoncheir. In that case—there was only one condition to meet for Rail’s safety. Namely—that the Hecatoncheir be destroyed.

"—Hey— Actually, I have a copy of the Hecatoncheir's map data. Will it be of any use?"

...What...!

At those words, everyone raised their voices at once.

"—Connect it to the arm of the seat!"

Prompted by Canal, he connected the suit’s computer terminal to the seat’s terminal and sent the data. Almost immediately, the map data Rail had taken from the Blacksmith was displayed in a corner of the main display.

"—Six vertical shafts leading to the depths! The position of one has been confirmed as the Bodigar's launch port! Then the target must be in one of the remaining five! And only one of those reaches the core of the Hecatoncheir!"

"That’s the one!" Kane raised his voice at Canal’s report. "It’s been the standard since ancient times: things that shouldn't be found and the boss of the villains are always in the deepest part!"

As he spoke, he was already maneuvering the ship toward that location.

"Canal! Prepare to fire the Plasma Blast!"

"—It will be an almost zero-range shot!"

"Yeah! An almost zero-range shot!"

"—Understood!"

Rail didn't know what a "Plasma Blast" was, but he felt something strangely ominous about the words "zero-range shot."

"...Hey... you guys... by any chance, aren't you thinking of doing something reckless...?"

"It’s okay!" Millie said to Rail as he muttered in anxiety. "Either way, it should be over in an instant!"

"...Um...! What do you mean by 'either way'...!?" He felt like he would only get more anxious the more he asked, so he muttered weakly and fell silent.

GUN!

A little before reaching the target point, Kane used aggressive maneuvering to point the bow toward the ground of the Hecatoncheir. The surface of the Hecatoncheir was almost right in front of their noses.

"Amplification chip ejection! Psy-Barrier deployment!"

The ejected amplification chips came to a stop in a regular hexagonal pattern around the Vorfeed, and as they came into contact with the deployed barrier, they produced a pale blue glow!

"—They found it!? This place!"

Stargazer’s voice rose in shock.

"Plasma Blast! Fire!"

Sizzle! Crackle! Zap!

Countless azure plasma arms—birthed from Volfeed’s barrier—pierced deep into Hecatoncheir!

And then—

The cosmos was engulfed in a blinding white light.

The End of the Nightmare

“...Ugh...” It seemed he had lost consciousness for only a moment.

Kane felt as though the number of red lamps in the cockpit had increased significantly, but he chose not to think about it and turned his eyes to the main display. “—Plasma Blast firing system, damaged—” Canal’s voice came from behind him.

In that voice, which was flatter than usual, Kane sensed a deep shade of exhaustion.

“Available main weaponry: one Leap Railgun, fifteen rounds remaining. Two Psy-Blasters. The rest is anti-air equipment only— Psy-Barrier is... capable of deployment, but it is unknown when it will overheat. And... That thing is—” He didn’t need to be told; he could see it. About one-fourth of the Hecatoncheir’s massive body had been blown away. —But— It hadn't reached. Not to the core—not to the Dugradigdo. “...Honestly... it has such neurotic defensive equipment...” Canal continued.

“It was deploying barriers individually at every one of the multiple bulkheads closing off the shaft... that thing...

We blew up a few of them, but because of that, the damage didn't reach the center... and thanks to that, we’re in this state after getting caught in the explosion...” Slowly, Kane looked back. Canal, standing there, was expressionless. Had some part of her malfunctioned? However, without asking that, Kane spoke. “—What do we do—?” “........................”

After a brief silence—Canal spoke. “...To be honest... the depletion is too great... —Please, lend me your strength—”

Kyubo! A single shot from the Leap Railgun caused one of the bulkheads blocking the shaft to vanish. Simultaneously, light was unleashed from a gun port deep inside—on the side of the shaft!

Deploying the barrier for just a moment to weather the bombardment, she deactivated it. At the same time, she hammered every remaining round of the anti-air guns into the gun port! With that, the battery went silent.

Anti-air guns couldn't inflict significant damage on the Hecatoncheir's main body, but they were useful for knocking out small gun ports. Next, she hammered a Leap Railgun shot toward the bulkhead even further in. During this time, only a few seconds passed. And the Vorfeed advanced its hull into the shaft.

—There was no bombardment from the rear. Most likely, when the Plasma Blast blow blew away a corner of the Hecatoncheir, the composite chips and targeting chips floating nearby were also caught in the explosion. But as time passed, the bombardment would begin again. There was no more time to spare.

She vanished several more bulkheads with the Leap Railgun and switched the bombardment to the Psy-Blasters. Aiming at the sides of the bulkheads, she destroyed the barrier generators before breaking the bulkheads with a second volley. And just as she was about to start on the next bulkhead. Go! From behind a suddenly opening bulkhead, a black mass appeared and unleashed a rain of light! "The Biological Annihilator Ship Dugradigdo!" At Canal's voice, white light and explosions overlapped!

The Psy-Barrier, deployed instinctively, finally overheated and vanished amidst the gunfire. "...You... bastard...!" Roaring, Canal applied full thrust. Gagiiiiiiiiiiiiii! The two spaceships collided head-on inside the shaft. —You seem quite exhausted—Vorfeed— In the voice of the darkness that spoke, there was a tinge of composure. "...I never... thought... you would come out from your side..." In contrast, Canal's voice was mixed with terrible static. Even so, the Vorfeed applied full thrust with all her remaining power.

—The space-transfer rounds are exhausted, and the barrier can no longer be deployed—

At this rate, your main cannons should be mostly silent. —What will you do? Shall you try energy cancellation like before? "...It would be... useless... wouldn't it... You showed yourself... specifically to invite that...

Even if the energy is cancelled, you're connected to the Hecatoncheir in the back where I can't see... so you can recover immediately... Something like that, right...?" —You read that well— Then—what will you do—?

"...Because of that last move... my gun ports are crushed... but actually, I kept back two rounds... of the Leap Railgun... the space-transfer rounds... Intending to hammer them into you... you see...” —They’ve gone to waste— “...I have no intention of letting them go to waste...” The instant she said that. Bohyu! The contact point between the Vorfeed and the Dugradigdo vanished! She had activated the Leap Railgun rounds inside the ship's hull! —Uguooooooohhh!? “Akuhhhhhhhhhh!” The voices of the darkness and Canal overlapped in pain. And then— “—Kane!” At Canal’s voice, the white shuttle headed toward the Dugradigdo!

Initially—the plan had been a bit different. Kane, Milly, and Rail would board the shuttle on the ship’s belly, which had been kept when the Swordbreaker’s outer casing was discarded. They were to follow behind the Vorfeed.

Once they dived to a certain depth, they would board the Hecatoncheir, head toward the central core—the Dugradigdo—and destroy it from the inside— That was how the procedure was supposed to go.

“—I’m—going too.” “—Huh?” While heading toward the shuttle’s airlock. At Milly’s voice from behind, Kane instinctively stopped. “—Just stay in the shuttle.” “I’m going. Me too.” Milly asserted, despite Kane trying to brush her off. There was a look of determination in her eyes.

“...I don't know what’s waiting. To be honest, I can't look after you. So, don't come,” Kane said. Firmly. In his mind was the image of one man. A man he had faced twice, and both times, he hadn't felt like he could win. He had trained since then. He thought he had become stronger himself. But—if asked if he could beat that man, to be honest, he didn't know. If Milly were there—he had absolutely no confidence he could protect her, But…

“I—have to settle this.” Milly did not back down. “...My father and mother... died in an accident... That’s how it’s supposed to be...” She said. Straightforwardly, while staring into Kane’s eyes. “It was when I was still a student... But I don't think that was an accident. They were murdered. That’s what I believe. Probably to bring me back here. That’s why—I lived alone.

I did jobs I couldn't tell people about—I went through painful times—but even so, I lived on my own. I’d never return here. For that reason. —Millennium Feria Stargazer— —That’s a name I threw away long ago—” “—”Kane remained silent.

Ever since Canal had easily agreed to keep Milly on the Swordbreaker, he had thought there was something to it. “—I always thought that when I returned here, it would be the time to settle everything. And now I am in the Hecatoncheir. So— I—have to settle this. Even if I have to bet everything—" The two stared at each other in silence. And then—

Goun!

A violent tremor struck the shuttle. "—Kane! Something strange came out from the back! What do we do!?" Rail's voice from the cockpit played over the broadcast. For a moment, the two looked at each other and, without a word, ran toward the cockpit. "What's happening!?" As soon as he jumped into the cockpit, Kane questioned Rail.

"Suddenly a bulkhead opened, and something black jumped out from the back of the hole! We've been fired upon... this ship is pretty beat up! I'm hitting it and pushing it back, but..."

Looking at the monitor display, they could see the spindle-shaped, black spaceship in head-on contact with the Vorfeed. "...Dugradigdo...!" The instant he whispered that. In the screen, the tips of the two ships vanished completely. Two screams echoed in everyone's heads. And then, "—Kane!"

At Canal's scream, Kane pushed Rail aside, seized the control stick, and dived the shuttle in. Toward the wound that had opened in the Dugradigdo. "Hey, wait, Kaaiiiiiiiiiiiine!" Rail's protest was, of course, ignored. (—Foolish!)

Along with the roaring voice of the darkness, the bombardment from the Dugradigdo headed toward the shuttle. But Kane's piloting evaded every single bit of it.

(—What!?) A voice of shock rose.

Gagun!

The shuttle dived straight into the Dugradigdo's wound.
"Let's go! Milly!" Kane roared.

"...Actually... ...You were scared... weren't you? Dugradigdo..." (—Wh... what...?) At Canal's weak call, the darkness was bewildered and questioned back. "...You came out from your side on purpose... I thought you intended—to catch us off guard... But that's wrong... actually... ...You were scared, weren't you? Submerging yourself in the depths of the Hecatoncheir... in the bottom of the darkness... and just waiting... Because you were scared... you jumped out..." (—Have you gone mad? Vorfeed? You say that I feel fear—?) "...The one who is mad... is you...

You understand that yourself, don't you? Since a long, long time ago...”

(—If you say I am mad, then the one truly mad is the world that gave birth to me. Then the one that truly should perish is the world that contains a more fundamental madness.

And if the world is mad, Vorfeed, then you are also mad.

Me, born only to perish those with life, and you, born only to perish me. What much difference is there in that?)

“...That’s... true... Certainly—there might not be much difference between me and you... The world that gave birth to me and you might also have been mad— But— As long as you intend to perish even this world— You are still mad...”

(—Say what you like. But—you know, don't you? You can't hold out any longer. Some part of your main program is damaged. It is your loss. Vorfeed—)

“With willpower... I’ll manage somehow...”

(—Willpower... I see... well, fine... Survive a little longer, and despair— I know. That your ‘Master’ has entered within me. It’s likely a plot to perish me from the inside— But your ‘Master’ cannot win. Against my ‘Host’—)

“—No—” Canal said. Even including a smile in her words. “They will win. My Masters will—”

“—You understand, right—Milly?” While running through the dark corridor, Kane spoke to Milly, who was running half a step behind. “The fact that there’s air here means—” “—I know—” Milly answered. According to Canal’s story, this Dugradigdo was originally supposed to be an unmanned ship. Nevertheless, the fact that there was air inside meant— They were there. Someone who was alive. Inside here. Most likely it was who they expected… “—This way!” Kane ran through an unfamiliar corridor.

There was no basis for it. Even in the map Rail had obtained, the inside of this place was, as expected, not recorded. Choosing the path to take was a hunch—or rather, something closer to instinct. Wary of the enemy’s appearance and reading the presence of the surroundings, they moved deeper and deeper. And—the two stopped. A single door visible ahead was left wide open. As if to invite the two in. “—So he’s saying... ‘Come in’...?” Whispering, Kane gripped the hilt of his Psy-Blade.

“...Finally...It’s time isn't it...” The gun Milly held was loaded with live ammunition. Dan! Jumping in front of the door, Kane stood ready. —There, a single corridor stretched out.

A space where there was no floor or anything. While the bottom continued to the abyss and the top to infinity, a single corridor stretched into the back like a suspension bridge over a canyon. Looking closely, of course, it was not an infinite space. In a large, black, spherical space—in its center, there was a black sphere one size smaller. The corridor continued to that sphere. Because everything was black, the darkness created by the two appeared even infinite. It was exactly as they had heard from Canal. Beyond the stretching corridor. A single door fixed to the black sphere. Deep inside that was—the central core of the Dugradigdo.

Even being in this place, the choking darkness became a miasma, cooling the hearts of the two. Canal had said. The darkness within it was the Dugradigdo’s will—and its true body. And what was tethering the darkness to that space was— The Dugradigdo’s core program. Namely, the inverted pentagram drawn on the floor. Destroying that was the mission of the two. With a gun, that would be difficult. If so, that role belonged to Kane. “—Let’s go—” Saying that without even waiting for an answer, Kane ran through the corridor. Creating a blade of light in his Psy-Blade— —The door opened on its own. As if to beckon the two in. Dashing in all at once— “—!”

And the two stopped. A vast space dominated by darkness. An inverted pentagram carved into the floor. And in the center of that pentagram— A man stood. His bristling hair was a golden flame. A sharp countenance reminiscent of a bird of prey. On his body, which was like a supple whip, he wore an anachronistic cloak.

The purple eyes that stared intently here, however, held no emotion. —The man Kane had faced twice before and could not beat—

There was one more figure. A man in a dark suit, Jay Mercury, who had perished at the feet of Kane and the others. A man who lived in darkness and was killed by darkness. “...I thought you’d show up eventually... But I never thought you’d be waiting in such a deep part...” “There should be one more!” Following Kane’s words, Milly spoke and leveled her gun. “Where is he!? Where is Albert Von Stargazer!?” “—Had you not realized? Millennium.” The man said. “Certainly, I do not recall introducing myself. —Millennium. And the one who carries Alicia’s blood. Let me introduce myself again. I am Albert Von Stargazer.”

“—Don’t mess with me!” Kane roared after a moment of silence sank into the darkness. “Everyone knows Stargazer is quite old!” Indeed, the man in front of them looked twenty years old at most. “However, this is the truth. The body at the time when the genes were at their best is regenerated through metabolism. For the Dugradigdo and me, it is an easy thing. Rather, the aged appearance was merely a temporary form to deceive those around us. —Unchanging eternity— That is the reward for those who chose to live with the darkness.” It was natural that Milly found the man somewhat familiar. In fact, she had seen him many times in the past. The older Stargazer. “...But that... doesn't that mean... throwing away your humanity...!” Kane said, still holding his sword ready. There was one reason he continued to listen to Stargazer’s calmly spoken words. It was because he didn't feel like he could win. Even now. Against the man in front of him.

—Cutting and erasing the pattern on the floor—even such a simple thing seemed like an arduous task in the presence of this man. “Throwing away humanity? No. This is transcending even the category of ‘living thing.’ I have spent time in this place, growing.

In the process of a single cell dividing and perishing, the genes are rewritten, little by little, into something else. That is how I am as I am now. Aging is already gone, and within me, there is no longer any emotion possessed by living things. Not joy, nor sorrow, nor hatred—and not fear.

I can continue to live—no, continue to exist—even within the ‘System Darkstar.’” “...Are you saying you’re a... perfect lifeform...?” Kane said, sweat beading on his forehead. “...But you know... you said it, didn't you... transcending the frame of a living thing... Right now, you’re just like a machine...” “That is correct—but what of it?” “...!” At that answer—Kane realized. That the one in front of him was not the true Albert Von Stargazer. Probably—the real one had vanished long ago. At the moment he encountered the one who scatters darkness.

Standing there was a puppet—a shadow of darkness in human form—that had been parasitized by the Dugradigdo and had its soul and genes reconstructed over a long time. And slowly— Stargazer turned his gaze toward Milly. “However—no one other than me was born to inherit the darkness. Not the man fallen at your feet. And Millennium, not your mother either. They could not accept this peaceful darkness— You, too, have refused to return into this darkness and stand there as an opponent. —I will ask one last time. Do you not intend to inherit the darkness with me?” Stargazer said. That he was asking for the last time. Namely— The moment Milly answered would be when the battle began.

Milly did not hesitate. There was no need to hesitate anywhere. She moved her lips— The instant she tried to move them.

Byugi!

Through the darkness, light raced—and refracted.

Kane had knocked away the arrow of light that Stargazer had suddenly released with his Psy-Blade. "—Hoh—" A faint tinge of admiration was contained in Stargazer's voice. "You deflected that just now. So you have grown to that level, I see." "...Wh...! What do you think you're doing!?" Milly shouted at Stargazer, who had launched an attack without waiting for an answer. "What do I think I'm doing? About what?

No matter how you answer, the fact remains that I and that man over there are incompatible. If battle is unavoidable, there is no need to wait for your answer—either." Vuuuuuuuuuun! In Stargazer's hand as he spoke, a blade of light was born. —A Psy-Blade. The difference was that there was no amplifier or bandana on that side.

Tamu! With a small popping sound, light flashed, scorching the air— Djun! He knocked away the bullet Milly had fired into the depths of the darkness. "So this is the answer. Understood." Saying that casually, he pointed the tip of the Psy-Blade at Milly's forehead.

Vun! The blade of light turned into an arrow— And once again. It was blocked by Kane's blade as he intervened. "—Hmm... it seems both of us—" "...That projectile weapons are useless, that is...!"

Little by little. Kane closed the distance. Without waiting for that— Stargazer turned light into an arrow again and released it! The moment Kane knocked it away. Stargazer kicked the floor! "Get back! Milly!" Roaring, Kane stepped forward.

Gyuga! Light and light collided, making the atmosphere scream. Kane had barely caught Stargazer's slash. At that moment, Stargazer pulled his sword and thrust it out again. Kane twisted his body in a hurry. The blade of light pierced his cloak. While still piercing it, it slid sideways and switched to an attack on the torso.
Kane jumped sideways while receiving it with the blade.

As he moved away, he made a single sweep with the blade, but Stargazer easily evaded the attack by simply tilting his upper body back slightly. "—Ugh!"

Taking some distance for a moment, he leveled the Psy-Blade in his right hand and removed the torn cloak with his remaining left hand. "Is the cloak in the way? You have certainly become stronger—but you cannot beat me." "Shut up!" Saying that, he held the cloak in front of him— And from behind it, he unleashed several blades of light in succession toward Stargazer!

—The reason Kane could block the rays of light released by Stargazer was that he predicted the targeted point from the direction the hilt was pointed and swung his blade there.

It was natural. It was impossible even for a non-human to 'see' and respond to the trajectory of something released at a speed close to light.

If so, it should have been impossible for Stargazer to block this attack released with the hilt hidden by the cloak. —But— After the blades of light left an afterimage in the darkness—

Stargazer stood composed, having knocked away every shot with his Psy-Blade. "...You've gotta be... kidding... hey..." "Projectile weapons are useless. That is what you said. Kane Blueriver." Saying that, Stargazer kicked the floor again. And Kane did too.

Just before the two contacted…
Paun! Milly, who had moved around to the side, fired at Stargazer. If he received it, an opening should have been born there for an instant. But as if he had read that, Stargazer stopped his feet suddenly. The bullet merely grazed his nose and vanished into the void. Kane's sword, which stepped in a step deeper, drew a trajectory as if scooping from bottom to top.

However, Stargazer twisted his body, evaded it, and simultaneously delivered a thrust from the right. Kane jumped sideways as if half-collapsing, somehow evading it. His balance was slightly disrupted. To fill that opening born for an instant, Milly fired for the third time. Stargazer knocked that away as expected—

"—Oaaaaaaaaaaah!" Kane, having regained his stance, raised a shout of spirit that seemed almost desperate, swung the Psy-Blade high above his head, and swung it down toward Stargazer. But—it was shallow.

Stargazer had merely jumped back a tiny bit casually. The tip of Kane's sword stood vainly in the floor. Naturally, his head became wide open. Stargazer stepped in a step… In that moment, "Go!" Roaring, Kane fired a blade of light! Stargazer swung his blade!

The blade of light grazed past Kane's face as he retreated in a hurry—shallowly slashing the bandana on his forehead. The light Kane released gouged the floor while passing under Stargazer's feet— And gouged the central inverted pentagram!

The instant it did… Oooooooohhhhhhhhhoooooooooooooooohhhhhh...! The groan of the darkness echoed around.

The light of the inverted pentagram flickered faintly for an instant— And as if sinking into the darkness, it lost its light and vanished. —That was all. The darkness groaned, and the light of the inverted pentagram vanished—other than that, no change was born. "...We did it... right...?" Milly whispered in a raspy voice. "No. Not yet. Millennium." Stargazer's voice echoed low.

"It was expected on our part as well that you, sent from the Vorfeed, would aim for that—the core program. But— Did you not expect it on your side? The fact that there is a backup for the core program." "—What...!?" Groaning, Kane quickly swept his gaze around.

However—only darkness spread around. Nothing that looked like it was to be found anywhere.

Though, Kane couldn't have even guessed what an unknown program would look like in the first place.

Even with the inverted pentagram on the floor he had just destroyed, if he hadn't been told by Canal, he wouldn't have thought that it was some kind of program. "There's no such thing... anywhere!" "If you cannot find it, then give up." At Kane's words, Stargazer merely said that.

As expected—he didn't seem to be soft enough to tell them the location of the backup program in response to their words. "Give up—and perish." Saying that without any strain—Stargazer ran. Toward Kane. "—Ugh!?"

He responded in a hurry—but the agitation caused a slight delay in reaction, and Stargazer's sword caught Kane's left shoulder shallowly.
"—Kane!"

“Milly! The backup program...!” At Kane’s words, Milly looked around the room. Kane was now barely receiving and enduring Stargazer’s attacks. However, even to Milly, who was unfamiliar with swords, it was clear he was being pressed. If so, the only method for a turnaround was the discovery and destruction of the backup program.

The groan of the darkness earlier was likely the sound of control shifting from the main program to the backup program. And the darkness still lingered in this space. If so, the backup program should be in this room. When Milly and Kane, the two of them, came here, what was in this room was— —Could it be! Milly ran to the corner of the room. To the side of the fallen and deceased Jay Mercury. She flipped the man’s body over— and then… Don!

The impact blew Milly away.

In the corner of his field of vision, he saw Milly’s body, which had crouched over the man, jump with thud! Along with the sound of some explosion. She leaned back just like that and slowly fell over onto her back. “—Milly!” Stargazer’s blade blocked his attempt to run over.

“You fell for it beautifully. I set a trap under the man’s body. So that it would explode if moved.” Stargazer spoke to Kane without loosening his hand that operated the clashing sword.

“I have reduced the power. She might still be alive, and she might be saved if you treat her quickly.” Without any emotion. Stargazer spoke in a flat tone. It wasn’t a lie. The Vorfeed is currently in a state incapable of combat. The weaponry was completely silent, and the automatic repair equipment was likely barely working.

However, she should have been able to do something like self-destructing to take the Dugradigdo down with her. The reason she didn't was because Kane and Milly were here. Stargazer intended to use them as hostages against the Vorfeed.

If he kept them alive in a state incapable of combat, the Vorfeed would likely hesitate to self-destruct. While gaining time that way—the Vorfeed’s functions would stop. That would be the time he would be victorious. “...Damn it...!” At Stargazer’s words, colors of anger and impatience seeped into Kane’s face. It was impossible to ask him to remain calm. Milly had fallen and was not moving. He wasn't even allowed to go and check if she was safe. The backup program could not be found— Even though the main core program had been destroyed— “...I see...!” While clashing blades of light, Kane realized that fact with a start.

Even for the Dugradigdo, no matter how many backups there were, it shouldn't have wanted the main program to be destroyed. If so, it would have been more convenient to intercept Kane and the others before they came to this room. But—Stargazer was here. Why? The sword and sword collided, scattering flashes into the darkness!

“You yourself are the backup program for the Dugradigdo! That’s it, isn't it! Stargazer!” “That is correct.” Without any strain or agitation. Stargazer answered the question. He had said. That he had spent a long time in the darkness and had his genes rewritten little by little. And he had become exactly that—the shadow of the darkness itself. Therefore, he intercepted Kane and the others in this room.

While he was away from this room, if anything happened to the main program, the Dugradigdo would perish then and there.

That was precisely why he had no choice but to intercept them here, even at the risk of the main program being destroyed. “However—” Stargazer’s blade flashed. “What does it matter if you know that?” Kane’s blade received the blast and knocked it away. “It is meaningless if I cannot be defeated.”

Using the momentum of being knocked away, Stargazer turned into his next slash. “The Vorfeed no longer has strength.” Kane barely evaded, received, and parried the series of flowing attacks. “Millennium has fallen.” That was all Kane could do for now—no, even that was painful. “The Space Force and such, weren’t even considered a threat from the beginning.”

The agitation from Milly falling had certainly robbed the sharpness from Kane’s techniques. “The only hope is you alone.” Kane was merely on the defensive— “But you understand, don't you? You too.” No, he couldn't evade everything, couldn't receive everything, and was sustaining small wounds all over his body. “Whether you can defeat me or not.” And Stargazer’s words eroded Kane’s heart. “You understand, don't you?” Light flashed. “That it is impossible.” Kane retreated back and evaded at the last moment. —No. He thought he had evaded. But— ...Vu...n... Making a sound like a winged insect. The blade of light was lost from Kane’s hand.

Stargazer’s single sweep had severed the cord connecting to Kane’s Psy-Blade generator.

Victory was no longer in doubt.

The idea that they might see a chance for victory if they brought it to a battle between person and person—thinking that was Vorfeed's misjudgment.

Stargazer—no, 'he' who had now become the Dugradigdo itself—was certain of victory. Manipulating and utilizing humans to accumulate power—initially, that was all he had intended.

However, that human—Albert Von Stargazer—brought benefits beyond what the Dugradigdo had expected.

The application of chips for each guard ship, the construction of the Hecatoncheir, etc.—even ideas the Dugradigdo itself couldn't imagine only became possible to propose and execute through the vessel of a 'human.' And the most unexpected byproduct was Stargazer himself. He had unknowingly assimilated with the darkness and exceeded the vessel of a living thing.

This ability was also one of those byproducts. Namely. The ability to see every trajectory of an attack heading toward his body an instant earlier. Whether it was a sword or a firearm. That point. That space. He could sense it. The trajectory of the sword Kane swung, the bullet Milly released.

It was not—a type of precognition. He could see the opponent's hostility, the flow of the power that tried to perish him. And he knocked away and evaded every hostility—every attack. Additionally, now— Kane's Psy-Blade had its connection cord severed.

Since he was always by the Vorfeed's side, if he summoned his willpower, he might be able to manifest a blade of light even without an amplifier. Just like himself now. However, that shouldn't be for a long time either. Because Kane was, after all, something within a human vessel. In other words, no matter how he thought about it—There was no victory for Kane Blueriver.

—With this—his Kane's chance for victory was gone—

He was desperately trying to rouse his heart, which was about to sink into despair. —No. Not yet. If that guy lets his guard down— For a very short time, he could make the blade of light appear even without an amplifier. In that instant— "—Are you betting everything on the final blow? Kane Blueriver."

Piku. At Stargazer's words, a faint look of agitation appeared on Kane's face. The two were now facing each other, keeping a distance.

—It might be more accurate to say that Stargazer had stopped his hand.

In Stargazer’s hand, as always, was a shining blade of light, and in the opposing Kane’s hand was a metal cylinder that had lost its shine—
“You can manifest the blade of the Psy-Blade even without an amplifier. —Isn't that right?” “...That’s no... human feat... a trick like that...” “But you haven't thrown away the generator yet. If so—it must be that way.” Even while speaking, he showed not a shred of an opening.

(—The chance of... letting his guard down is gone too, huh…) Kane cursed in his heart. But—he couldn't despair and throw everything away here. He was not an opponent who would settle things peacefully just because he surrendered. If so, he had no choice but to bet everything on—a single blow. “...I get it... I get it very well... then—I’m coming!” Saying that, Kane stood ready. With the Psy-Blade that had lost its light in hand.

The world is—dark. That was the first thing she felt when she realized. What had happened. The area around her head felt strangely slimy, but what that was exactly. She didn't even have the idea to think about it.

It was just—that the world reflected in her opened eyes was terribly dark—only that bothered Milly. She could see light. A single—a line of light less than a meter long. But that was not the light she was seeking. She felt that way. —Light— Even if she tried to search, she couldn't see light. For some reason, her body wouldn't move either. —Light— The line of light moved. And— She felt as though she had seen a tiny, tiny point of light in the void.

Kane kicked the floor and Stargazer leveled the sword of light again. That stance broke slightly. An opening was born—no. He was inviting him.

Kane. Kane—did not hesitate. If he was distracted by the opening born, it would instead cause hesitation in his blade. Regardless, he stood as he had initially intended— “—Go!” In Kane’s hand as he roared, a blade of light was born.

For an instant. Toward the point of light that had increased its brilliance. Milly had pulled the trigger of her gun.

Every trajectory of an attack could be seen. The blow of all his soul that Kane unleashed. And the shooting by Milly, who had regained consciousness. Both of those were visible to Stargazer. Kane changed his stance just before and unleashed a slash like scooping up. The bullet Milly fired would only graze him and wouldn't hit. Then there was no problem. He would knock down Kane’s blow—and with that, everything would end. Kane no longer had the strength to produce a blade again.

He didn't know how many bullets were left in Milly’s gun, but it was the same no matter how many rounds there were. And what would remain were—the two who had lost hope and held only despair in their hearts. Stargazer swung his blade without hesitation.

Leveling the Psy-Blade in front and just before entering the distance. Kane released his spirit and extinguished the sword of light he had created. In the opponent’s eyes, the afterimage of the sword leveled head-on should have been scorched. Extinguishing the light and switching to a diagonally downward stance—

At the same time as entering the distance, along with a horizontal sweep as if scooping up, he summoned his spirit again and manifested the blade of light! —But— Stargazer’s sword, which had read that, struck the blade Kane had created! Striking it— —He was pressed. Vu!

That, which contained all of Kane’s spirit, had produced a blade of light that was several times the normal—almost close to running out of control. Not by physical strength or technique. By the pressure of the blade created by Kane’s ‘Ki,’ Stargazer was pressed for an instant. But that was also just for an instant.

Stargazer showed no agitation, and put strength into the sword in his hand— Gin! At that moment. What Milly’s bullet shot through was not Stargazer’s body. The hilt of the Psy-Blade he held. —Wha... The light vanished. ...at...!? And the light in Kane’s hand— Slashed Stargazer.

—Was it—a coincidence—? —Strangely calmly—

He found himself trying to analyze the situation.

—If—Kane had been a bit more in despair—if at the end, he hadn't produced that much spirit— He wouldn't have been pressed by a blade with an output close to running out of control. Milly’s bullet shouldn't have shot through the hilt of the Psy-Blade he held either. —If—

If he had shifted the timing of his interception slightly. Or if at the moment the swords met, he had pulled instead of pushing back— —His defeat should not have happened— .... —No. That's wrong.

Stargazer wondered.

Even if they had repeated this ten times, Milly's bullet would have pierced the hilt of the Psy-Blade he held, and Kane's blade would have slashed him. He had a feeling that would be the case. —I see—this is— Stargazer felt as though he had attained enlightenment at the very end. His own ability to evade attacks. Kane's vitality, which transcended theory. Milly's marksmanship, which seemed to look into the future.

They were abilities granted precisely because they had been close to 'Darkness' and 'Light' for so long— He had always thought so. But that was wrong. —Those were abilities that humans themselves—no, living things potentially possessed— Abilities paired with the power of the 'Darkstar,' which scattered destruction— The power to weave the future.

And— Stargazer's consciousness diffused into nothingness. Together with the consciousness of the Dugradigdo.

Yuoohhooohooohhh...!

The darkness— Screamed. A death-throes shriek.

Kane knew that 'something' was diffusing from Stargazer's fallen body. —It was over. The curse of the darkness. Kane ran over to Milly. Throwing away the hilt of his Psy-Blade. "—Milly!" "...Ka...ne..." Raised up in his arms, Milly said.

Because she was covered in wounds all over her body and bleeding from her forehead, she looked severely injured at a glance, but in reality, her injuries were not that terrible.

"...It's over, isn't it..."
"—Yeah. Let's go." Carrying Milly, he started running. ...Gooooohhhhhhh... In the room, having lost its core, the thick darkness was swirling aimlessly. Kane, while holding Milly, crossed the corridor that looked like a suspension bridge—

—Gopah! Behind him, there was a sound like a container filled with water shattering. When he looked over his shoulder, a wave of darkness burst through the black sphere and came overflowing toward them. ...Yuoooohhhhhhuhuaaaa... The darkness surged toward the two—

“—Disappear! The world no longer has a place for you!” Without running away. At Kane’s shout as he stopped and turned around, the darkness stopped its movement— And as if it were a fleeting illusion, it melted into the void. —All that remained was— A vacant space. “—Let’s go home, Milly.” Saying that, Kane turned on his heel.

“Is it over!? —How is she!?”

Welcoming Kane and Milly as they returned to the shuttle, Rail, who was in the pilot’s seat, said. “It’s over! She’s a bit hurt—but it’s not that bad! Get us out of here! Rail!” “Got it!” Responding, Rail pointed the nose of the shuttle toward the exit of the vertical shaft. And—the Hecatoncheir shook. “—What!?” “It’s probably an attack by the Space Force!” Rail said to Kane’s voice.

—The Hecatoncheir, having lost the Dugradigdo, was nothing more than a mere husk.

Fearing the Vorfeed’s energy offset, the Dugradigdo had created the Hecatoncheir’s power source out of something different from ‘them’ and had not given it a sense of self.

It had built it strictly as a puppet of the Dugradigdu, as a massive combat unit. Therefore— The Hecatoncheir, having lost its controller, abandoned all chip control capabilities.

And—the bombardment from the Space Force fleet began to gouge the giant body of the Hecatoncheir one after another.

—Had he realized it?

In this battle, if he had only activated the System Darkstar, the location of victory would have been somewhere else. There was only one reason he had continued to hesitate to use it. Because to the Dugradigdo, the Vorfeed’s capabilities were unknown. Because of the fear of the unknown. Had the Dugradigdo realized—? That he had been defeated by the ‘fear’ that should have been his sustenance—by the ‘fear’ he himself had harbored—

“Rail! To the Vorfeed— No! Connect to the Swordbreaker!” While giving Milly first aid, Kane said to Rail.

The shuttle was now passing through the vertical shaft and leaping out into space, moving away from the Hecatoncheir. Behind them, the black star crouching in the void was receiving a fierce onslaught from the fleet. But—

Around them, there was no sign of the Vorfeed—no, the Swordbreaker, which had finished its mission to subjugate the Dugradigdo. It was still inside that vertical shaft. He had transmitted that he had defeated the Dugradigdo when he escaped. Nevertheless, the fact that it had not yet shown itself meant— “—Connected!” “...Kane...” At Rail’s voice, Canal’s muffled voice echoed from the speaker. “—The video data—hasn't arrived—” Rail said. “...Milly, too... thank you... very much...” “—Hey—” What had he sensed in that voice? Kane’s face lost its color. “...Rail-san, too... you helped me very much... ...In the end... it was you yourselves... who protected your world... ...With this... my role is also at an end...” “Hey! Canal!” Kane raised an urgent voice. “Don’t talk about things you don’t understand! Escape from there right now!”

“...Because I was quite damaged here and there... I am somehow... holding on with ‘willpower’... haha... ...It is... already enough...” “Canal!”

“...Besides... dreams left behind by a world that is already gone... are not needed... in this world...” “Canal!”

“...If I remain... I might again... become the cause of some kind of conflict... that is why... like this...” “...What are you saying... saying such gloomy things at this auspicious time...” It was Milly who said that. “...Milly...! Are you alright...? I heard you were injured...” “Never mind about me...” Interrupting her words, Milly said.

She was enduring the pain, but her voice was steady. At this rate, her injuries probably weren't much to worry about either. “...Canal... you... you really don’t understand, do you...” “...I don’t... understand...?” Kane, Milly, and Rail would board

“...That’s right…Certainly... I would refuse any attempt to push a nightmare that I don’t know who saw onto me ever again.”
“...Yes... that is why...”

“However—you see. Humans are made quite haphazardly, you know... If it’s a fun dream, anyone’s dream is more than welcome. ...Or rather, those kinds of dreams are more fun when watched by many people.” “...............”

“—Besides... could it be...? We went to the trouble of being happy, saying we won, we won...

...You aren’t planning on committing suicide with such old scrap metal... and ruining the excitement, are you...? I won’t forgive you if you do such a boorish thing.” “....................”

“...Canal?” “...Is it... okay...? ...Can I... go... over there...?” Canal asked. Timidly. As if she were a frightened child.
“...What...?” “...Is it... okay...? ...Can I... go... over there...?” “—That’s wrong—” Kane said. In a gentle voice. “You aren’t ‘going.’ You are ‘coming home.’” “...You seem to be injured over there, too... Don’t just use your spirit on us. Show your spirit for once, and come home safely.” After a slight silence at Milly’s words— Canal answered. “—Yes—”

Countless explosions wrapped around the Hecatoncheir.

Before the Space Force could bombard it, the explosions were now giving birth to the next explosions, accelerating the collapse of the giant body. With those white lights at its back— A single ship’s silhouette approached.

“—Welcome home. Canal.”

—I’m home—

—And together they would weave the future.

Lost Universe End

Afterword

Everyone, sorry to have kept you waiting for so long.

I present to you the final volume of *Lost Universe*: *When the Darkness Ends*.

From the very beginning, with terms like "Dark Star" and "Nightmare" hanging all over the place—words that strongly reminiscent of a *certain other series* the author writes—it seems quite a few of you were harboring the question: "Just how exactly is this linked to *Slayers*!?"

The answer is!

As you might have realized after reading through this: the correct answer was "There's almost none of that."

……………………………………………

—Wait! Ahh! Don't throw stones!

...Well, truth be told, at first, I just really liked the idea of writing "The One Who Scatters Darkness" and giving it the reading "*Dark Star*," or using names like "*Gorun Nova*," so I ended up using them in both series. To be honest.

I mean, look, since they are fundamentally separate works, even if there are parts that remind you of the other, keeping that to a minimum—just a bit of seasoning—is the true spirit of an Edokko (Tokyoite).

Even though I was born in Hyogo and live in Osaka. The author, that is.

Anyway, with this, the *Lost Universe* series is officially complete.

Well, for a series that’s only five volumes long, I can’t help but feel like an incredible amount of time has passed since we started. In the end, as I wrote in the first afterword, the Theory of Relativity still hasn't been broken.

Umiu. Let's place our hopes for that in the future!

However! In the meantime, robots have started walking on two legs and the plans for the International Space Station construction have been announced!

Lately, space development—which felt like it had been abandoned for a while—is starting to step back into the spotlight (or so it feels to me)!

At this rate, I hope they keep cranking out space development so we can GO colonize the Moon and Mars!

And then, eventually, I'll build a cheap house on Mars, put a Martian cat on my lap on a Martian veranda, and eat "Face on Mars" manju buns while sipping Martian tea. That kind of Martian sunbathing is my ultimate romance... or rather, my dream! (Though I might be wrong about that.)

Well, anyway, back to the topic.

This flow of time it took to write this... did it end up being a good thing or a bad thing?

In the original plan, [REDACTED], who was supposed to [REDACTED] at the end, ended up [REDACTED] in this volume. If I had finished writing this a bit sooner, that outcome would probably have gone exactly according to the original plan.
Translator note: He probably means either Milly would die at the end but instead she lived or he means canal.

Well, the world is full of things that go beyond calculations.

Speaking of things beyond calculations, that would have to be the anime adaptation of *Lost Universe*.

When *Slayers TRY* finished, I was vaguely thinking, "Maybe talk of the next *Slayers* anime will come up—"

When I heard, "We want to talk about the anime..." I thought, "Mm. Here it comes." But—

"We'd like to do *Lost Universe*..."

"..................I beg your pardon?"

It really caught me off guard.

Well, during the broadcast, I just became a total fanboy, enjoying myself while shouting things like:

"Myuwoooo! Canal has become so cute!" or,

"Yay! The CG is so cool!" or,

"So *Ragudo Mezegis* is just a straight-up isosceles triangle!?"

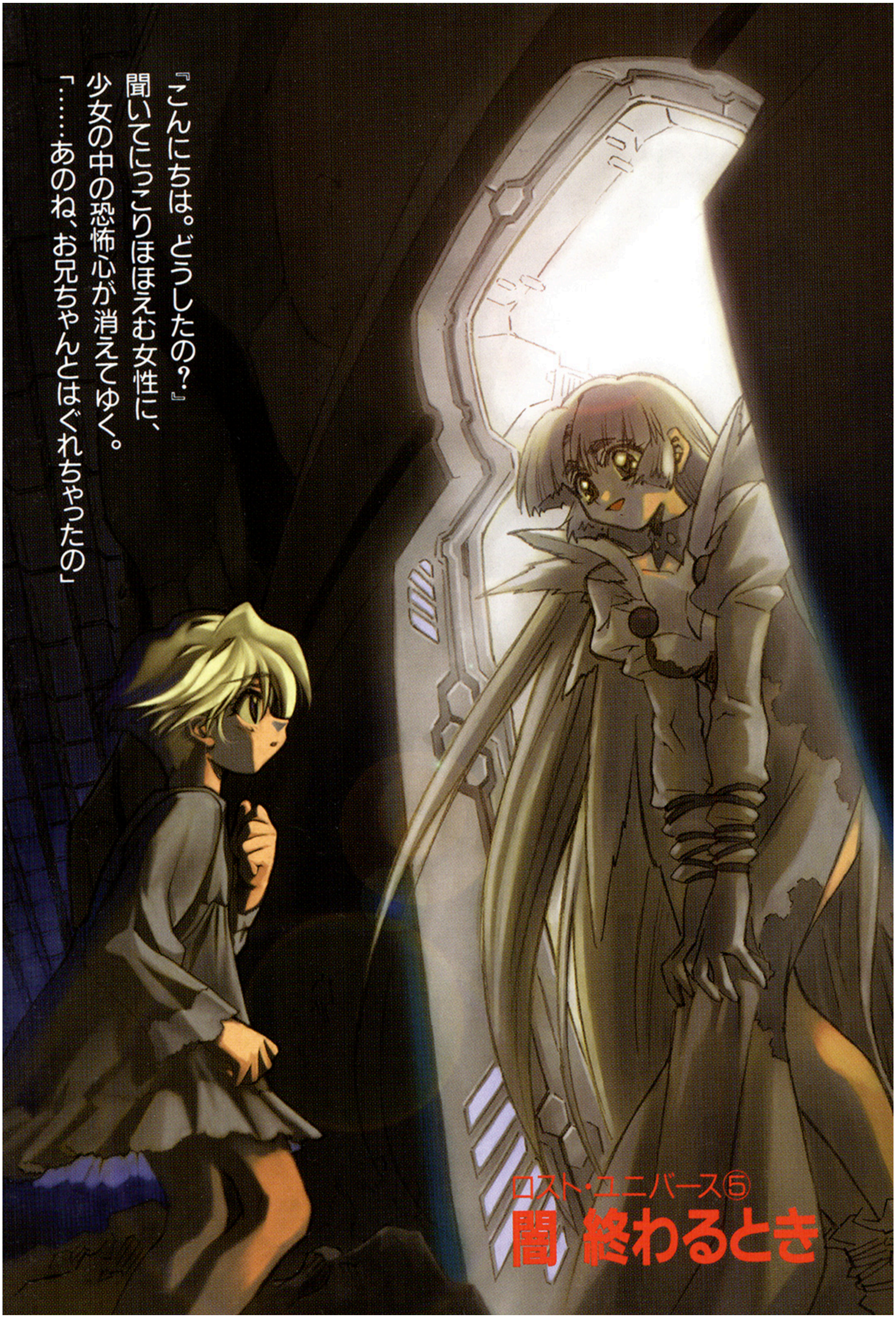
But! When the time came to finish this fifth volume after the TV series ended!

The author realized with a shock!

"...Dohieeeeeeee! Come to think of it, most of the plot twists were already spoiled by the animeeeeeeee!"

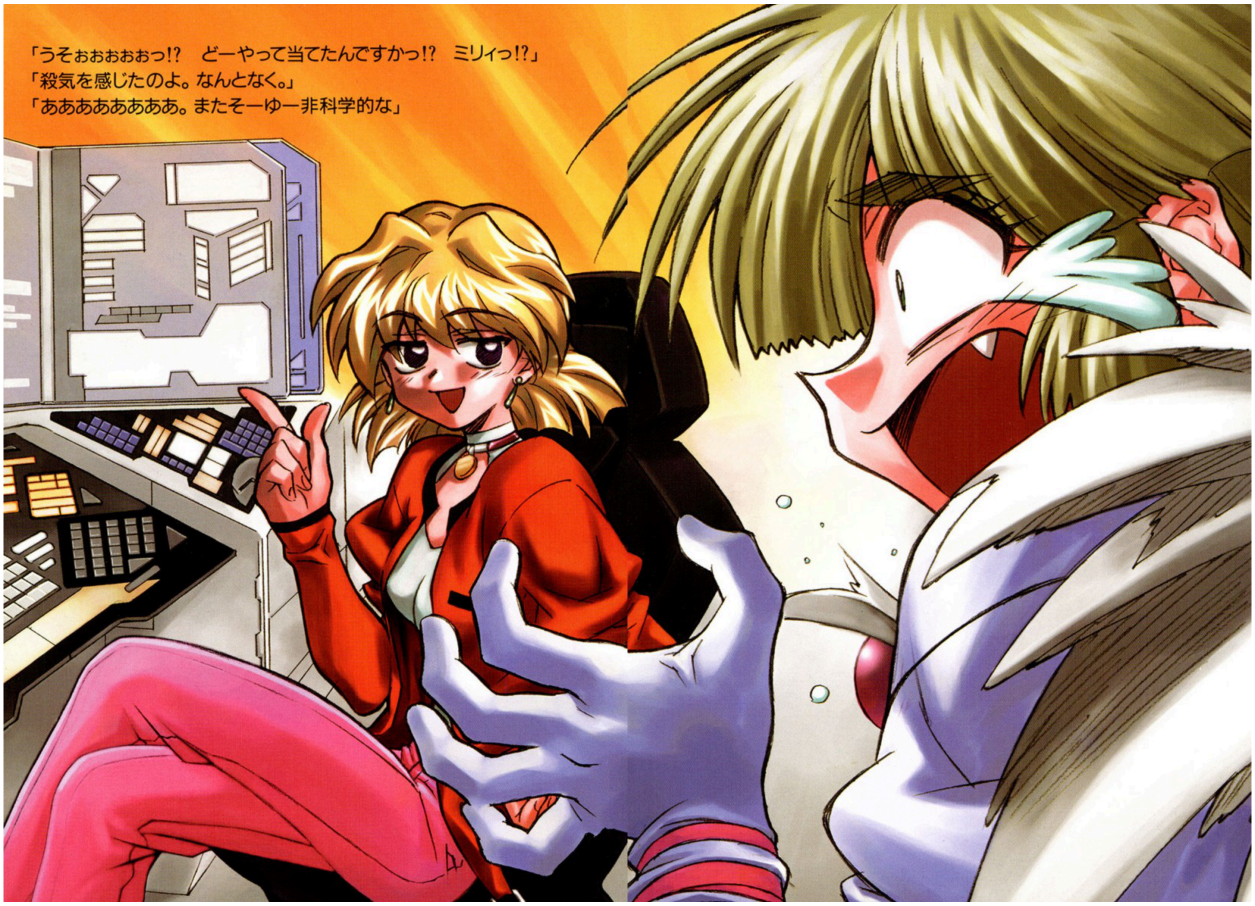
And that was—

The end.

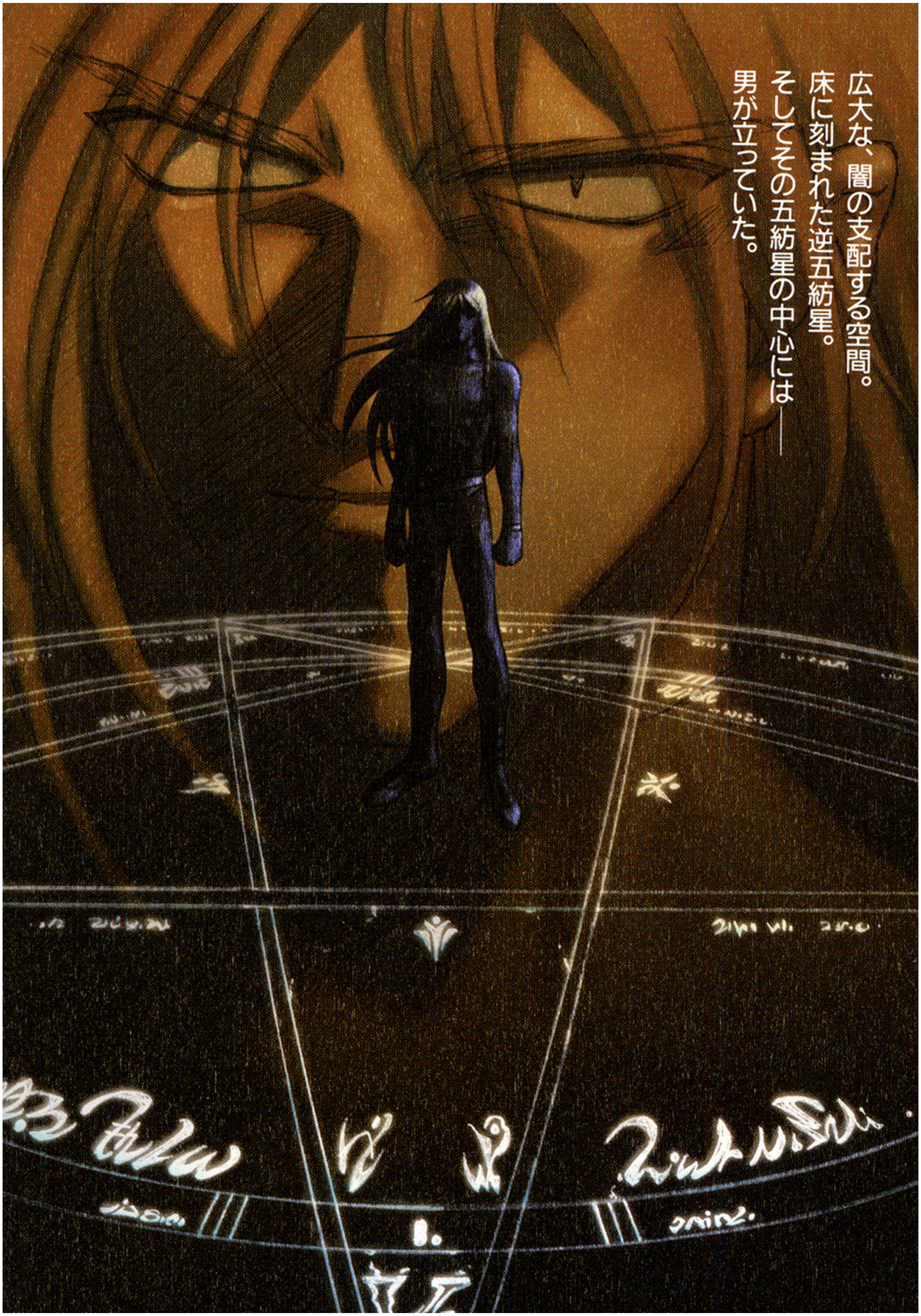


『こんにちは。どうしたの？』
聞いてにっこりほほえむ女性に、
少女の中の恐怖心が消えてゆく。
「……あのね、お兄ちゃんとはぐれちゃったの」

ロスト・ユニバース⑤
闇 終わるとき



「うそぉぉぉぉぉっ!?　どーやって当てたんですかっ!?　ミリィっ!?」
「殺気を感じたのよ。なんとなく。」
「あああああああああ。またそーゆー非科学的な」



広大な、闇の支配する空間。
床に刻まれた逆五紡星。
そしてその五紡星の中心には——
男が立っていた。